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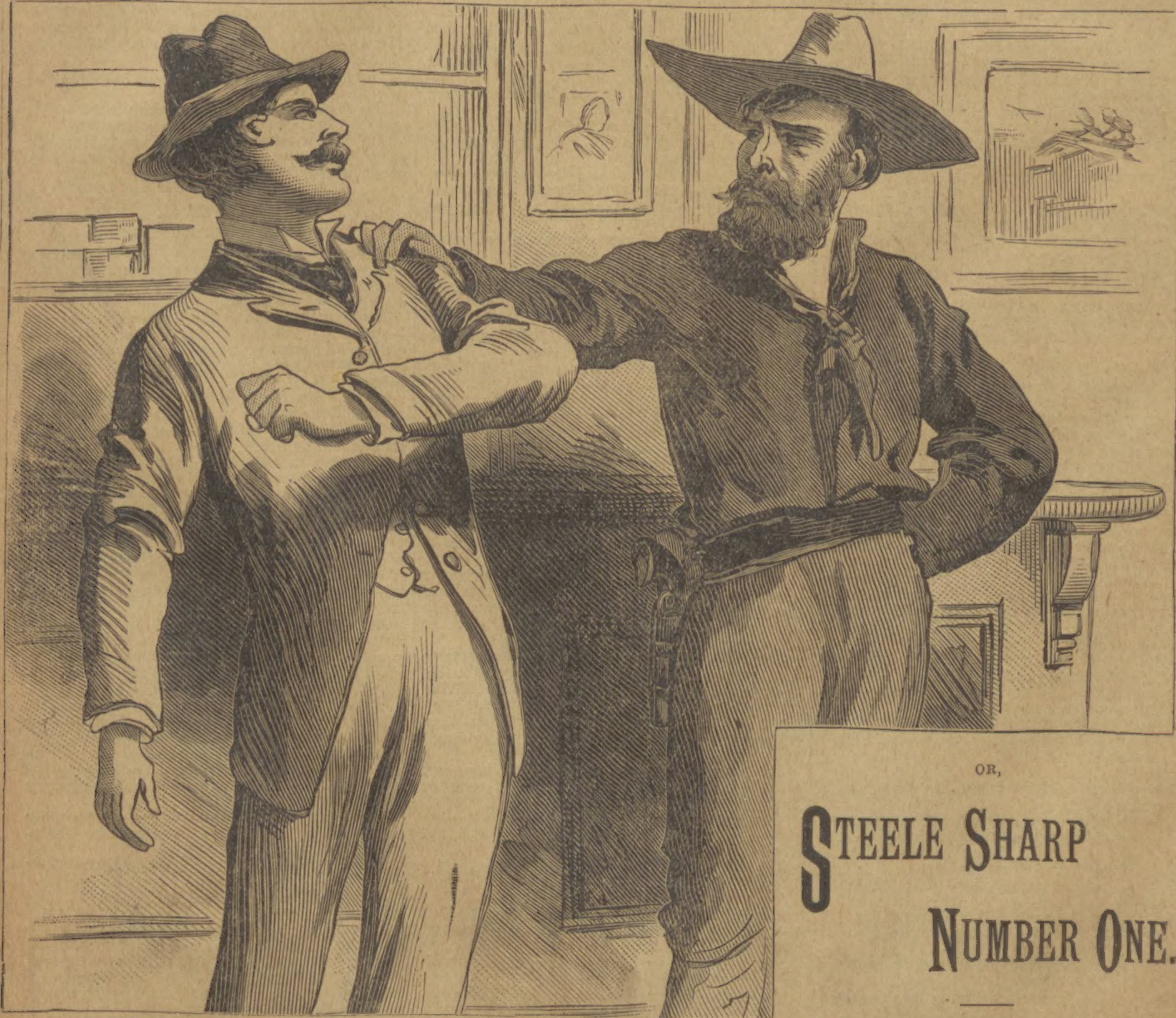
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Vol XXXIX.

Sheriff Huntway, of Montana;



OR,

STEELE SHARP
NUMBER ONE.

"I AM THE ONLY AUTHORIZED DETECTIVE ON THE TRAIL! YOU ARE AN IMPOSTOR!" SAID STEELE SHARP NUMBER TWO.

THE MYSTERY OF A DOUBLE.

SHERIFF HUNTWAY, Of Montana;

OR,

STEELE SHARP NUMBER ONE.

BY ED. A. WICKS.

CHAPTER I.

A FORTUNE LOST.

FORTY thousand dollars!

It was a large sum of money, but there it lay in two dingy brown piles before Grudge Grave.

His countenance was seamed and brown, almost of a color with the parallel heaps of bank-notes that lay smoothed out before him on the greasy pine table.

His large nose had once been of the Roman type, but an accident had broken the bridge, giving it a wide spread across the by no means prepossessing countenance.

The man's bosom rose and fell with deep emotion as his small, beady eyes regarded the heap of money.

"All mine!" he muttered.

Then he caressed the pile with a knotty hand, and then—*crash!*

Glass rattled to the floor; a missile rolled across the table and pivoted for a second, then lay still before the eyes of the astonished man, who had sprung to his feet at the first sound, revealing the fact that he was armed with a revolver.

He drew the weapon as he glared at the window through which a ragged hole was revealed.

The tallow dip flared, making weird shadows on the ribbed wall.

No further sound, however, broke the silence, and the beady eyes of Grudge Grave rested on the missile that had so startled his meditations.

He proceeded to examine the now harmless thing.

A stone, long and smooth, fastened to which by gum-resin was a strip of yellow paper.

"Somethin' on that, sure," muttered Grave, as he bent his shaggy head a little nearer. "I ain't no scolar, and them hyeroglyphics hain't the evenest, nobow."

With scowling brows the man regarded a few written words on the paper. After considerable study he made them out, and then read in a low voice:

"You is watched!"

"Confusion!" snarled he. "What galoot got up that scare? Watched, eh? Wal, 'twon't do 'em any good, not a hooter," and he disgustedly flung the stone messenger into a corner.

Once more the man resumed his seat at the table. It seemed that he believed a friend had hurled the warning through the window for his inspection, and that he was in no immediate danger of interruption by enemies.

Grudge Grave was a cautious man, however, and he was now determined on getting the two heaps of bank-notes out of the way.

"Don't see what Zonk wants ter come sneak-in' erbout in this way fur. Why don't he come in like er man and tell me what he's discovered?" muttered Grave, as he put a set of knotty fingers over one of the money piles.

Suddenly he started to his feet. He still clutched the money in his right hand, but his left dropped to the butt of his revolver; the sound of a step outside fell on his ear. It may have startled the grim treasurer, for there was a wild look in his glistening eyes, as he turned them toward the window.

"Ah!"

The revolver slid back into its place, and a grimy hand went up.

A dull thud sounded. Grudge Grave grasped his forehead, reeled and fell heavily to the floor.

Not a sound issued from his lips.

Was the man of money dead in the midst of his spoils?

The tallow dip sputtered and grew dim. A face peered in at the window for an instant, then it was gone.

Soon the door opened and a man crossed the threshold and stood in the little room. A pair of sharp eyes glared about, and after resting a moment on the prostrate Grave, turned to the table on which bank-notes were scattered in reckless profusion.

"The stone was well aimed," muttered the intruder, as he strode to the table and began eagerly helping himself to the money.

He was not long in doing this, when, without bestowing a second glance at the senseless form on the floor, he left the house.

Soon after Grudge Grave stirred. A groan fell from his lips, one brawny arm moved, and he sat upright.

He struggled to his feet, and glared about him like a wounded tiger.

He could see nothing, since the tallow dip had burned out. Striding across the room, he commenced to explore a small corner cupboard.

A burning match applied to a fresh dip soon produced another light.

Then Grudge Grave sprung to the table.

A cry of rage fell from his lips:

"Robbed!"

The one word resounded through the room. Turning the table over, Grave gazed under it. Nothing met his gaze but the unclean floor.

"Who has done this?" grated the strong man, trembling in every limb. "It must be Zonk. I'll find him if I follow to the ocean, curse him!"

He hurled the table from him savagely and strode to the door. His hand touched the latch, then he started back with a stare of stupid dismay.

The door had been pushed open from without, and several gleaming rifle-barrels were thrust into the face of the house-owner!

Grave still grasped the tallow dip in one hand. He saw the terrible danger that menaced, and was quick to act.

He flung the burning dip full in the faces of the riflemen, at the same time dropping like a flash to the floor.

Of course the light was extinguished, but the movement of Grudge Grave only precipitated his doom. There was a grand rush into the room, and several men fell over and upon the prostrate man, pinning him to the floor. Almost at the same instant the light of a lantern was flashed upon the scene.

"Don't let the rascal escape!" cried a ringing voice. "Hold him fast! I'll soon fix him so we can manage his ugliness!"

Struggle as he would, and Grave was a powerful man, he could not free his pistol arm, and soon the lantern-bearer bent with his knee upon the fallen man's chest.

"No use, Grudge Grave; we mean business," said the borderer's captor, sternly.

"Cowards! let me up."

"In a moment. I must fix you a little first."

And the speaker produced a pair of handcuffs.

The blood-stained visage of Grudge was hideous with rage at the sight of these.

"Don't you dare put them on me, Cliff Huntway!" hissed the discomfited man.

"Quietly, man, quietly," warned the young man. "I think you're not in a position just now for issuing orders."

The handcuffs were secured about the man's wrists, when Huntway permitted his prisoner to rise to his feet. He presented an unpleasant sight as the rays of the lanterns were cast on his face.

He rattled his bonds and gnashed his teeth while the glitter in his eyes was like the glint of steel.

"We tracked you here," proceeded the leader of the six men who had followed into the room, "and it will be the wisest thing you can do to make a clean breast of it, Grudge Grave. In the mean time, boys, search the house."

Clifford Huntway was a tall, well-built young man, with a brown mustache and gray eyes. He had the honor of holding the office of sheriff for one of the most thickly-settled counties of Montana. He had thus far proved himself a most efficient officer, and the people were well pleased with him in consequence.

The time for a new election was drawing near, and the young sheriff was even more vigorous in the prosecution of his duties than usual.

The posse made a thorough search of the log structure without results, and so reported to the sheriff.

The latter turned to his sullen prisoner.

"You hear the report, Grudge?"

"I reckon I do."

"What have you to say on the subject? You have the stolen money, and it will be well for you to disgorge."

"Ef you know so much, what makes yer ask questions?" growled the prisoner.

"I wish to know where you have hidden the money. If you answer my questions honestly your punishment will be much the lighter."

"Wal, I dunno," muttered Grudge. "It looks

like you wanted to compromise Mr. Huntway. Is that so?"

"About so."

"Ef I tell ye whar the money is, ye'll let me go scot free?"

And the beady eyes of the man bent a keen, peculiar glance into the face of the sheriff.

"I couldn't promise you that, but—"

"Then my clam's shet," sullenly declared the unsavory prisoner.

"Very well. We'll find the money anyway, and you'll never see the light of day again," declared the sheriff bluntly. "Boys, take your prisoner and bear him to the jail."

"Jest a moment," protested Grudge, as strong hands were laid upon him. "I reckon I'll tell about the chink."

"Very well, speak quickly," urged the sheriff.

"Jest open that cupboard-door ag'in, and pull that 'ar loose nail outen one corner of the bottom."

One of the men obeyed, when, to his surprise, a false bottom fell out, revealing a canvas bag. On opening this it was found to contain about a hundred dollars in gold and silver coin.

"It's only a little store, but ye'r' welcome to it, gents, ef you'll jist take these 'ere shackler offen me and let me go," said the prisoner.

"Confound you!" exclaimed Sheriff Huntway, "that isn't the money we were looking for."

"It's all I've got—w'ot I've saved from my honest 'arnin's," avowed Grave.

A puzzled look overspread the face of Huntway. He called one of the men aside, and after a short talk with him, turned again to the prisoner.

"The money we seek is that stolen from a messenger who was bringing it through from Helena. The messenger now lies at the point of death from injuries received. You had a hand in that robbery and perhaps murder, Grudge Grave, and could tell us all about it if you would."

"I don't know nothin' about it," grunted the prisoner.

The sheriff at once gave orders to move off, and soon the house stood dark and deserted.

Ten minutes after the departure of the sheriff's posse, the cabin door was pushed open and a new-comer entered.

CHAPTER II.

A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT.

THE room which the person entered was dark as a pocket. The stranger scratched a match and set the tallow dip going. Then he glanced keenly about the room.

A smooth face and slender form stood revealed—apparently that of a boy of eighteen. He wore a garb of coarse goods, and might have easily been taken for a countryman just from the farm.

"I saw the posse an' followed them here," muttered the boy. "They have taken the terror of Pine Forks to jail, but they did not get the money. Why not?"

The question seemed a puzzler.

"I think there's no danger of my being interrupted," mused the youth. "I am determined to find the stolen money and save Valerie if it costs me my life."

The boy now proceeded to examine the interior of the cabin. He went through the cupboard from which Grudge Grave's money had been taken and made a thorough examination of the inside.

As the boy proceeded with his work we notice a slight protuberance between the shoulders, revealing the fact that he is deformed. The make-up of the coat, however, almost effectually concealed the slight defect.

"No money here," muttered the searcher, after a close investigation. "I am quite sure that Grave had the money, however he may have obtained it. Everything depends on the wounded messenger. He must have recognized his assailant, and should he recover, the mystery would be quickly revealed."

From the cupboard the boy went to other parts of the cabin. In a back room he discovered a trap-door.

He opened this and flung the rays of the tallow dip below.

A small cellar was revealed, the floor littered with boxes and barrels.

Placing his candle on the floor beside the open trap, the boy lowered himself into the cellar; then, seizing the dip, he proceeded to explore his surroundings. The apartment was small, and the boy was not long in examining it thoroughly.

In one of the boxes he found some tools, new and strange to him.

"burglars' tools, I do believe! I'll appropriate these; they may aid me in my search."

He placed the tools in a small box which he carried under one arm.

Having satisfied himself that no money was concealed in the cellar, the young detective pushed up his box of burglars' tools preparatory to leaving the cellar.

"I've made one discovery, at any rate. This Grudge Grave has been a bad man in the past, and his companions must be of the same stamp. I don't believe the stolen money can be far from here, and I mean to find it out soon, Valeria."

He put up his hands and clutched the sides of the opening above, but recoiled and staggered away from the trap.

At the same moment a dark object whizzed into the cellar from above. A man's face peered into the cellar, a faint impression of which was fixed on the brain of the boy ere he fell insensible beneath the iron weight that had been hurled at his head.

"There, I guess Bart Bartlee won't trouble the world any longer," growled a voice above the trap.

Then the assassin knelt at the edge and peered below. He seized the tallow dip and thrust it down into the cellar. He saw the boy insensible and bleeding on the ground.

"Bart Bartlee, if you had not meddled you would never have met with this fate. I am a desperate man, and will not be thwarted."

The man turned from the door, closing the trap.

Then he stood for a full minute in a thoughtful attitude.

"Yes, I'll do it; it's the safest way," muttered he.

Then he drew a heavy box over the closed trap, and proceeded to pile on wood, stools, everything handy.

A little later, when the man left the cabin, a satisfied smile played over his features. He had not been long gone when a red tongue of fire pierced the ribbed wall of the Montana cabin.

It was soon in flames.

At a safe distance the assassin and incendiary watched the conflagration.

Soon Grudge Grave's cabin would be a mass of smoldering embers.

"Tis well," muttered the man who watched near. "In the cellar of the cabin will be found a skeleton, all that is left of Barton Bartlee, the boy who conceived the idea of finding the man who assaulted and robbed Granger and Longwood's messenger."

"Ah! you were smart and keen as a brier, Bart, and I would have spared you, but it would have been dangerous to my future, and so you died!"

And now the flames leaped toward the gray sky, illuminating the woods for many rods around.

"I must not remain," muttered the villain who had caused this destruction. "To do so would invite ruin."

He hurried from the spot, perhaps troubled deeply at the wicked deed he had just performed.

A little later a mounted man galloped from the vicinity and passed into a wagon road that led into an open country, along the base of a mountain, directly into the Western town of Pine Forks.

This was the county seat and a village of several hundred people. It possessed the push and energy of most Western villages, with very little refinement such as we find in towns of like size in the East.

Pine Forks had sprung into existence within two years, and at the time of our story was "booming." Several cattle-kings resided here, the most noted being Granger & Longwood.

A messenger from Helena, while conveying forty thousand dollars to this firm, was assaulted and left for dead, and the money taken from him.

The robbery created no little excitement at Pine Forks, and Erastus Granger, senior member of the firm, at once offered a reward of ten thousand dollars for the arrest and punishment of the robbers.

Jasper Flake, the messenger, was not killed, as supposed. He had been conveyed by the stage to Pine Forks, where he lay in an insensible state at the house of Mr. Granger.

The large amount of reward offered stimulated search, and already, not six-and-thirty hours after the crime, a score at least of Pine Forks's citizens were looking for the robbers.

One of the most determined outlaw-hunters was Clifford Huntway, the young sheriff of the county and an unfavored suitor for the hand of

Valeria Granger, the pretty niece of the great cattle-king.

Ten thousand dollars would place him on a sure footing, the young man believed, and he secretly determined to win the reward.

A thorough investigation of the circumstances of the crime led the sheriff to suspect a noted young tough named Grudge Grave, whom he arrested as already recorded, but a little too late to secure the stolen fortune, as the reader knows.

A gray-haired man sat before his desk in one of the most imposing dwellings at the Forks.

The room was furnished with real elegance, as the owner of the dwelling had brought with him from the East most of his household adornments, and took great pride in the ostentatious show of his taste to those who were permitted to enter his parlor and library, the latter being his usual office, or place of transacting his business.

It was Erastus Granger, the great cattle-king of Montana.

He had been writing, but just now had laid aside the pen, and pushing back his big arm-chair, seemed deeply meditating.

"But for the loss of this money I should not hesitate," mused the old man. "I don't know but what it will injure my prospects materially. Of course there is little hope of getting the money back, even should the robber be captured."

At this moment a visitor was announced.

It proved to be the young sheriff, who bowed low before the great man of Pine Forks.

"Sit down, Mr. Huntway," said Mr. Granger.

"Do you come with news?"

"Yes," answered the young man, as he accepted the invitation to be seated, "I have made an arrest."

"Indeed!"

"Grudge Grave is in jail, and I feel confident that he is one of the robbers."

"Why do you think so?"

"To-day he was exhibiting a good deal of money while in liquor at the Open Hand Saloon. I kept an eye on him, saw him in consultation with Tub Zonk, and heard the name of Flake mentioned. These villains know all about the robbery, as you'll find when Flake comes to speak."

"Ah! but I'm afraid the wounded messenger will never speak again."

"So bad as that?"

"Yes. But what about this arrest?"

"As I said I think I have the right man. He made a desperate resistance."

"Yes. Did you find the money?"

"No."

"I care more for that," declared the cattle-king, with clouded brow.

"The loss of this money is an injury to your business then?"

Mr. Granger glanced furtively about for an instant, then bending forward, he laid his hand on the arm of Huntway, and said huskily:

"Unless I regain the stolen money inside of a fortnight, I am ruined!" the cattle-king excitedly answered.

CHAPTER III.

THE INDIAN DOCTOR.

It was a startling announcement made by the Montana cattle-king.

The young sheriff regarded him in evident surprise.

"So bad as that, Mr. Granger?" he said finally.

"I supposed you had enough to tide you over. I am sorry, and if it lies in my power the money shall be returned to you."

"Do not whisper this to any one, Clifford," warned Mr. Granger. "I confide in you only, that you may make a more determined effort."

"I understand," returned the young man, rising. "It may be possible to get a confession from my prisoner. At any rate I shall do what I can to save you."

In passing from the house the sheriff encountered a young woman in the hall—Valeria Granger.

"Ah, I am glad to meet you," cried the ambitious young sheriff, putting out his hand.

"Do you bring news?"

Valeria was a tall, handsome girl, with black hair and eyes, and would have adorned any parlor in the land.

She accepted the proffered hand.

"Yes."

He then related how he had tracked Grudge Grave to a cabin in the woods and made him a prisoner.

"I know all about the situation, Valeria, and will save your uncle."

"Save my uncle?"

The girl opened her eyes in wonderment.

"I mean I will rescue the stolen money," uttered the sheriff quickly, somewhat confused. He had promised to keep the old man's secret, and here he was revealing it to his niece.

"I trust you may succeed, although I have but little hope," retorted Valeria.

The young sheriff regarded her keenly. He would have given something to read her thoughts. He was desperately smitten, yet did not know how the beautiful ward of Erastus Granger felt toward him.

"Valeria, I would like to ask a question of most vital import to me," cried the young man, suddenly.

Again he took her hand and glanced into her eyes. Her face paled suddenly, and she drew her hand away forcibly.

"I hear uncle calling—I must go."

And thus she left him. He was pained and puzzled. Of late he had great reason to hope. Valeria's sudden coolness to-night dashed cold water on his hopes.

"I'll win the ten thousand, and then she shall be mine," he muttered, as he hurried from the house.

Early on the following day the Grangers had another visitor in the person of Rollin Longwood, Mr. Granger's partner.

He was a man past thirty, of medium size, and rather handsome. He dressed well, sported a diamond on his shirt-front, and had a smile for everybody.

He wore a blonde mustache, and there was always a pleasant look in the mild, blue eyes.

Rollin Longwood had been less than a year in Montana, and he seemed unable, or at least unwilling, to conform to the rude ways of the border.

Although duds in attire, the junior member of the firm of Granger & Longwood was not lacking in courage. He had thrashed one bull, and crushed another, when he was permitted to go his way undisturbed.

Rollin and the sheriff were friends, although it was whispered that Valeria might be the means of creating a coolness between the two.

"How is Flake this morning?" questioned Rollin, confronting Valeria.

"No better."

"Hasn't regained his senses yet?"

"No."

"Well, this is bad. I'll consult Erastus about employing another doctor."

"Can you find another?" queried the girl.

"I thought Doctor Wise was all the medicine-man Pine Forks could boast of since Barrow died."

"I believe he is, but there's an old Indian doctor a few miles west of town. He may know more than Wise."

"I do wish you would send for him then. I am afraid poor Flake will die."

"If he does the secret of the robbery goes with him."

"I suppose so, although the sheriff has arrested a man on suspicion."

"So I have heard."

Rollin passed into the room occupied by Mr. Granger. The latter had been seriously troubled with rheumatism of late, and on the morning in question he was unable to leave his chair without assistance.

"Ah! it's you, is it, Rollin?" uttered the old cattle-king. "I am glad you have come. You have been to Helena?"

"Not yet," answered Rollin, seating himself.

"Not yet? I thought you intended to employ a detective in this case. It's hard lines if we don't find the stolen money, Rollin, as you know."

"Yes. The money must be found," agreed the young man. "I'll go to Helena to-day. I set out last evening, but thought better of it, and returned. How is Flake?"

"He's going to die."

"I hope not."

"He's doomed, I feel sure of that, unless something can be done. Dr. Wise says there's no help, and I am of the same opinion myself. He further says the man may arouse sufficiently to talk before the final summons."

"Ah! that will be something gained!"

"Yes. If Flake only speaks we may learn the name of his assailant. The robbery was perpetrated at midday, and it seems to me, unless the villains were disguised, Flake must have recognized them."

"True. I hope he may recover sufficiently. I would advise trying another doctor."

"If we could find one."

Rollin mentioned the Indian doctor, and Granger concurred in the desire to have him sent for.

"I'll send a messenger for the old fellow immediately," declared Rollin Longwood, as he took his departure.

"Do you think of visiting Helena to-day?" questioned Valeria, as the young cattle-king was leaving the house.

"I had thought of it."

"I should so like to visit the city. If uncle will consent I mean to keep you company if you do not object."

"I am very sorry," said Rollin, "but one of my horses has fallen lame and I am compelled to proceed on horseback. Besides it is the quicker way, and I am anxious to have a detective on the scent at the earliest possible moment."

The young man departed.

Valeria watched his retreating form, and found herself secretly admiring him.

"He is a splendid man, and yet there's something about Rollin Longwood that I do not like. I know Clifford Huntway loves me. Ah! it is trouble enough that I see in the near future. Which shall it be, the rich cattle-king, or the humble sheriff?"

The future alone could answer. As for beautiful Valeria she was undecided.

Flake still lay in a semi-conscious condition, when a queer-looking personage halted before the house of the cattle-king, and dismounted from a small mustang.

An old man, bent with the weight of years, long hair hanging about his ears, a grim, bronzed face, and you have the new-comer as he approached the door of the cattle-king's house.

"This is Mr. Granger's house?"

"Yes," said Valeria in answer to the old Indian's inquiry.

"I was sent for to see sick man," grunted the stranger. "I am from the Lost Canyon, west."

The old doctor carried a small leather sachel, old and worn, in his hand.

Valeria admitted him to see her father. Mr. Granger seemed glad that a new doctor had arrived to look at Flake, and at once bade his daughter show him to the room where lay the injured messenger, attended by Tim Quales, the cattle-king's Irish servant.

"A bloody Injin, eh?" muttered the servant. "I don't like the looks of the haythen nohow."

A small dog rose from where he had been lying at the feet of the Irishman, and growled at the red doctor.

"Keep quiet, ye spalpeen," commanded Tim, and he emphasized his words with a kick that sent the dog howling from the room.

"Now look at poor Flake and tell us ef he'll git up ag'in."

The last words were addressed to the Indian doctor.

Flake had been shot in the head, and at present was hot with fever. He had opened his eyes but no intelligent look was in their depths.

After feeling his pulse, the old Indian opened his bag and produced from its depths several small paper packets. From these he produced powders of several colors, and dropped them, one by one, into a glass of water that Valeria had brought for the purpose.

Stirring them well with a spoon the Indian doctor turned to Valeria and said:

"Give one spoonful in half an hour, then every two hour after dat."

Immediately the red doctor shut his grip and moved to depart. In answer to a question from the girl, the doctor shook his head and said:

"Ve tell better to-morrow. If 'live, den he git well."

A little later the Irishman's dog sneaked into the room. He growled at the Indian as that worthy passed out.

Tim did not reprimand the brute this time, but himself followed the doctor from the room.

At the end of half an hour Valeria gave the sick man his medicine, and then left the room for a minute.

When she returned she saw the little dog, with his fore paws on the chair, drinking from the tumbler containing the new medicine.

"Get down!" screamed the girl.

The dog fled from the room down the hall, and out the open door. Valeria debated about throwing the medicine away, and finally concluded to wait.

Half an hour later Tim came, looking troubled.

"Jack is dead, miss."

"Jack?"

"My poor dog. I jest found him dyin' in the garden, foam'n' at ther mouth. He got p'izen'd I do believe."

"Poisoned!" exclaimed Valeria springing up white and startled.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FATAL RING!

"Did you ever know Tim Quales ter lie?" said the Irishman, trying to frown.

"Oh! I hope there is some mistake," cried Valeria. "Where did the dog get poison, and—Oh! Heaven!"

The beautiful girl sunk to a chair, white and faint with an awful suspicion. She thought of the new medicine, a spoonful of which she had given the wounded messenger. Tim's dog had drank from the tumbler and died immediately after. Had the old Indian made a mistake and left poison in the glass?

The thought completely overpowered the girl for the time.

While the two regarded one another in a state of perturbation a man entered the room without the formality of rapping.

"Ah! Doctor Wise!" exclaimed Valeria. "I am glad you have come. We are in terrible trouble."

"In trouble?"

The good doctor gazed from one face to another.

"Yes," said Valeria, falteringly. "I fear a terrible mistake has been made with regard to the medicine."

"I never make mistakes, miss."

"Not you, but the other doctor," said she, quickly.

"The other doctor?"

Old Dr. Wise elevated his brows and regarded Miss Granger as though he fancied she was out of her mind.

Of course explanations were in order, and the doctor listened while Valeria told how and why the Indian doctor had been summoned. A frown rested on the brow of Dr. Wise at the last. He made no comment, however, but at once set about examining the patient, who seemed to be sleeping heavily.

"He is really in a bad state," declared the old physician, "but it may be from causes aside from the medicine."

Next he turned his attention to the tumbler and its contents. He first smelled, then tasted, at the last making up a wry face. He shook his head.

"I'm afraid something is wrong," he finally declared. "You did wrong in sending for another physician without consulting me. I ought to throw up the case, but will be lenient for once."

It was plain to be seen that Dr. Wise was angry.

He left medicine in another tumbler, and took the first away with him.

"I'll be back in an hour," he declared, as he hurried away.

Dr. Wise was not long gone. He returned to announce that the medicine left by the Indian contained a deadly poison, although it would require several spoonfuls to kill an adult. The dog had got enough to "lay him out," as the old doctor expressed it, grimly, but he hoped to save Flake.

Valeria was deeply moved at the incident, of the morning, and obeyed all the instructions of Dr. Wise to the letter. After several hours' work the girl was pleased to see Flake revive from the effects of the poison, and then she went to her uncle with the facts.

The cattle-king was angry at the outset, when he learned of the base attempt upon the life of his trusty messenger.

"The Indian may have made a mistake," suggested Valeria. "I don't suppose we would be justified in condemning him unheard."

"I do condemn him," declared the rheumatic old man, vehemently. "It was no accident. I understand why some one desires to put Flake out of the world before he regains his senses. He can tell that which will ruin some one in Pine Forks, rest assured of that. Oh, for a good detective! Be careful, Valeria, and nurse poor Flake tenderly. He must be made to speak."

Valeria had never seen her uncle so deeply excited before. She feared that fatal results might follow did he not become quiet in mind.

At this juncture she was glad enough to see Sheriff Huntway approaching the house.

He came in and requested an interview with Mr. Granger. Valeria left them together and returned to her patient.

"So you think it necessary to employ a detective on the case," said Huntway, after they had conversed for some time.

"Yes, we must find one, my boy; we must."

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Granger. I have a proposition to make," said the young sheriff, his face flushing and his eyes glowing.

"Well?"

"It is highly important that you recover the forty thousand dollars stolen from Flake a few days ago?"

"You know how important," groaned the cattle-king.

"Yes, I love your niece, Mr. Granger."

"Sir!"

In spite of his rheumatism the old man half-started to his feet, a flush stealing through his wrinkled cheeks.

"Please don't feel angry," urged the young sheriff. "I know how you feel on the subject, and in fact I do not know that Valeria cares a straw for me, but with your consent, Mr. Granger, I mean to win her for my wife."

"Sir, sir, this is presumptuous!" thundered the cattle-king, trembling with wrath.

"Not if I restore the stolen money."

"What do you mean, young man? How can you restore what you haven't got?"

"I believe I have a clue. If you promise to throw no obstacle in the way between your niece and myself I will find the stolen fortune. I think you will find in me the detective for whom you have longed."

There was an eager light in the eyes of the ambitious young sheriff as he gave utterance to these words.

For an instant only the old cattle king hesitated, then he put out his hand and clasped that of his young friend.

"As sheriff of this county it is your duty to push this matter, Mr. Huntway," avowed Granger, "but if a promise not to interfere between you and Valeria will add stimulus to your search I give you the promise. The girl knows her own heart. If you restore the money I'll use what good offices I possess to further your suit."

"This is more than I asked," declared Huntway, elatedly. "Rest assured that, before the fortnight is out, the robber shall be under arrest, and the stolen money returned to its rightful owner."

Clifford Huntway left the house, bowing and smiling to Valeria as he passed out. He had won a victory, and seemed quite enthused over the prospect.

The old Indian doctor did not come again. His poison failed to work on Flake, although it killed the Irishman's dog, and Tim registered a vow to get even with the "bloody Injin" some day if he had to search the whole Territory of Montana over.

Two days passed.

Flake began to mend, and Dr. Wise declared it as his opinion that the wounded messenger would eventually recover.

Rollin Longwood returned from Helena with news that he had employed a detective who promised to undertake the case the moment he heard of the reward offered.

"Steele Sharp is a keen one," declared Rollin, "and it's my belief that he'll soon find the robber. I interviewed Grudge Grave in prison and feel sure that although he may know something of the robbery, he is not the principal in the crime."

With Sheriff Huntway and the noted Steele Sharp on the trail, Mr. Granger felt that it would be scarcely possible for the robbers to escape.

And Flake would soon be able to speak.

A revelation from him would brush aside all doubts.

It was late at night, five days after the attempt at poisoning. Valeria sat in the room occupied by the sick man, having relieved Tim but a short time before, the latter in the land of dreams not far away, snoring lustily.

Valeria was tired, too, from her ceaseless vigils. She would not give place to other watchers while able to fill the place herself, she was so deeply anxious to hear the first words that might fall from the lips of the wounded messenger.

If he should die the robbers might never be discovered. Ah! how momentous were the issues that hung on that one man's brittle thread of life!

Deeply thinking, Valeria soon fell into a drowse.

Her pretty head nodded—she was asleep!

And then a dark figure stole through the door into the room. A man in mask! He paused when near the middle of the room.

The breathing of Valeria told the night-prowler that the girl slept.

Swiftly and silently he crossed the floor and bent over the form of Flake.

The wounded messenger's eyes were open, and glared into the face of the mask. A wild cry rang out, as a knife gleamed above the bosom of the man on the bed!

Valeria sprung up frightened, and intensely

startled. She saw the hand raised, with a gleaming knife in the fingers; then, with only the thought of her charge's safety, she flung herself on the would-be assassin, at the same time raising the house with her screams.

She seized the assassin's hand and tugged with all her strength. Tim came rushing in only to be felled by the fist of the mask, as, with a mad oath, he dashed from the room, leaving two trophies in the hand of brave Valeria—a knife and a ring.

Almost fainting the girl sunk to a chair. Her face was ghastly as she held up the prize—a glittering ring. The knife had fallen to the floor, and Tim yet lay insensible.

"Ah! that ring!" exclaimed Valeria. Her breath came in hot pants, while a deadly faintness seized her.

She recognized the assassin's ring, for she had but lately seen it on the finger of Clifford Huntway!

CHAPTER V.

STEELE SHARP, DETECTIVE.

FOR some minutes the startled Valeria sat like one in a trance.

The fatal ring she slipped into a pocket, and then staggered to her feet.

Had Flake been harmed? This was her thought now, as she picked the knife from the floor and examined the blade. Its brightness was untarnished.

She breathed easier. Approaching the bed she gazed at the face of Flake.

It was purple, and he seemed dying. Had he recognized in the masked assassin his assailant of the road?

"Help!" The cry fell in husky accents from the lips of Valeria.

Tim sprang up at this time and rubbed his bruised visage ruefully.

"Be the powers! show me the man who struck Tim Quales and I'll bust him to smithereens, bad luck to the devil!"

"Oh, Tim, Tim, something awful has happened!" cried Valeria, clinging to the arm of the Irishman. "A masked man was in here just now, and attempted to murder poor Mr. Flake."

"Nonsense, ye was dr'amin', me darlint," declared Tim, soothingly.

He, however, listened to the girl's story, and made an immediate search of the premises without making any discoveries. The would-be assassin had made good his escape. He had left behind, however, a memento of his presence that might lead to his identity and arrest.

"Don't tell Uncle Erastus," warned Valeria, when Tim returned from his fruitless search. "It can do no good, and he's feeling bad enough already."

"I'm mum's a bisket," said Tim, who, it was evident, doubted the story of the attempted murder as told by Valeria.

Quiet soon reigned at the house of the cattle-king. Tim, after making sure that the doors were all locked, returned to his peaceful couch once more, and was soon snoring as loud as ever.

And now Valeria examined the knife once more. This might prove a clue to the assassin. Ah! but she had a clue in the ring she had torn from the finger of the masked man. It was a clue that startled and troubled her deeply.

During the rest of the night the poor girl was uneasy and deeply troubled. The ring had once been on the hand of Huntway.

Was the sheriff then an impostor? Had he robbed the messenger, and converted the forty thousand dollars to his own use while pretending to be an officer of the law? The thought was a pertinent one, and it gave Valeria the deepest trouble of her life. She looked into her own heart now and read the truth—she loved Clifford Huntway.

"It cannot be, it must not be; there is some mistake, I am sure of that," murmured poor Valeria.

The longest night must have an end.

When morning dawned Valeria regarded herself in the glass to see a white, haggard face, and eyes that showed all her trouble. She felt provoked at herself for those telltale signs.

The knife she had wrested from the hand of the assassin she concealed in her trunk. For the first few hours she was like one in a dream, undetermined what course to pursue, and kept her own counsel. Tim said nothing about the night adventure, and so Mr. Granger was left

in ignorance of this second attempt on the life of the wounded messenger.

About noon Rollin Longwood came in, and was closeted with his partner for an hour. When he came forth he met Valeria, who was still pale from the experiences of the previous night.

"You're not looking well, Val," said he. "I'm afraid you are overtasking your strength watching poor Flake. Why not let Tim take the whole charge of the fellow?" He seemed seriously interested in her welfare.

"I cannot trust Tim," she answered, simply. As he was about to depart, however, she laid a detaining hand on his arm, and looked up, with a strange appeal, into his face.

"Mr. Longwood, I would like to ask you a question."

"Certainly," smiling, "a dozen if you like, Val."

"It was you who recommended the Indian doctor?"

"Yes."

"And you who went for him?"

"I must answer no to that," he returned, smiling. "I was too busy that day, and as a gentleman was to pass near the old doctor's home I sent word by him. The Indian came, but seemed to do more harm than good. I have been sorry since that I recommended him. The old fellow seems to have lost his cunning. I know that he was once a good physician."

The troubled look deepened on the face of Valeria. She could not repress a tremor of voice when she inquired:

"Who was the gentleman who carried your request to the old medicine-man, Mr. Longwood?"

"Clifford Huntway."

Her face blanched, and she recoiled as though stung. It was with difficulty that she retained command of herself.

"Why are you so particular, Val?" he questioned, suddenly, bending a sharp look into her face. "Do you imagine anything is wrong?"

"No, I suppose it's all right, but the old Indian made a mistake as you know. You did not see him when he was here?"

"I did not."

"I did not like his appearance."

"You may be prejudiced against the race."

"On the contrary, I am prejudiced in favor of the red-men. This one was not a fair specimen. He was bent with years and hideous of countenance."

"Bent with years—hideous of countenance?" cried he, excitedly. "You do not mean that. Good gracious! I saw Indian John not six months ago, and he was still tall, straight, and agile, his eyes bright as of yore, although his hair was gray. You have not described the Indian doctor at all, Miss Val. Surely there has been some mistake. Huntway sent the wrong man."

"I believe so," articulated Valeria, faintly. She tottered to her room, and sunk down with an inward groan, while Mr. Longwood hurried from the house about his business, doubtless deeply impressed with what he had heard from Valeria Granger.

Guilty! That one word rung in the soul of poor Valeria, and had reference to Cliff Huntway.

She took out the ring, and examined it closely. There could be no mistake in it.

That night, Valeria, while watching in the room occupied by the wounded messenger, went to the window, and opening it, flung the knife she had wrenched from the hand of the night-prowler into a clump of bushes near.

"It will not be found at present," mused she. "I know my duty, and should it ever be necessary to produce the knife, I will know where to find it. The ring I will keep. Circumstances are weaving a web about Clifford that may down him. Ah! if that man is guilty, then have I been most terribly deceived!"

On this same evening Mr. Granger received a visitor, a stranger, rather stout in build, dressed in a coarse, gray suit, carrying a wide-rimmed hat in his hand. A heavy mustache graced his lip, and his eyes were keen and dark. He was rather below the medium height, and heavy through the shoulders.

"This is Mr. Granger, I believe!" said the stranger, as Tim bowed him into the presence of the cattle-king.

"I am Mr. Granger; and you?"

"Am Steele Sharp, of Helena."

"Ah! the detective!" exclaimed the old man.

"Sit down. I am glad to see you, sir, glad, indeed. My partner said he had spoken to you. Sit down, sit down."

The detective obeyed.

CHAPTER VI.

SOMEWHAT MYSTERIOUS.

"My partner sent you here?"

"A gentleman spoke to me about a certain case—the theft of a large sum of money I think," returned the detective.

"Yes, yes, exactly," muttered the old cattle-king, hurriedly. "It was my partner, Rollin Longwood. We need a detective's services badly, very badly, I assure you. We have been robbed of forty thousand dollars."

"A large sum, indeed."

"Large enough to cripple us materially," declared Mr. Granger. "I have offered ten thousand dollars for the return of the money."

"And capture of the robber?" supplemented Mr. Sharp.

"Well, yes, I suppose that comes in naturally enough, although I care much more for the money. Of course it will be a hard matter to get the one without the other."

"Presumably."

"You will undertake the case?"

"First state it, and then I will see."

"I supposed Rollin had done that."

Mr. Granger still patted his right leg, which was in a swollen condition from rheumatism, and he was not in the best of humor, although he tried to appear civil.

"He merely made mention of it, and said I would get all needed information from you. Fact is I was too busy to listen on the day we met. I never undertake a case without a full knowledge of the situation, so far as it is possible to obtain it. You must confide everything to me, absolutely, Mr. Granger."

"I am willing to do that if you will promise to make a success of this affair," returned the cattle-king.

"I have never yet failed."

This was said with no little assurance. Steele Sharp did not look self-confident at any rate.

"There's but little to tell," declared the old cattle-owner. "My messenger, while on his way from Helena with forty thousand dollars in bank-notes on his person, was assaulted and left for dead at the roadside, and the money taken from him."

"When did this happen?"

"About a week ago."

"And you have no clue to the robbers?"

"Not in the least. The sheriff is looking into the case. He has arrested a man named Grudge Grave, whom he thinks to be one of the robbers. No money of consequence was found, however, and I think Huntway has made a mistake."

For some minutes Steele Sharp did not speak, but seemed to reflect deeply. At length he said:

"How many members are there in your family, Mr. Granger?"

"But two, my niece Valeria, and myself," answered the old man, seeming surprised at the question.

"Servants?"

"One, Tim Quales, an Irishman, and as true as steel."

"You do not distrust him?"

"No indeed. Tim is as honest as the day is long; besides he did not leave the premises during the day when the robbery was committed. You must look elsewhere for the highwayman, Mr. Sharp," declared Granger emphatically.

"About your own family I would ask a question. Valeria is the only relative you have living?"

"My nearest relative, yes."

"Her father?"

"Dead."

"When did he die?"

"Years ago, I cannot tell just how many, and he left a little child to my care. My good wife was alive then, and we brought up Valeria carefully, as an own child."

"She was an only child?"

The eyes of the detective seemed to take into their depths a strange light, as they peered into the face of the old cattle-king. The latter frowned, and looked aside as if annoyed.

"I don't understand why these questions, sir," uttered Mr. Granger in a vexed voice. "You are a stranger to me, and I don't know that I am bound to give you my whole family history."

"Certainly not," was the quick rejoinder. "People who have secrets ought to be close-mouthed."

"I have no secrets."

"I am glad to hear it," answered Steele Sharp. "So you wish me to understand that"

Valeria is your nearest living relative, and that she came to you penniless, on the death of her father?"

Again the searching eyes of the detective were fixed on the face of the cattle-king. The latter seemed more annoyed than ever.

"I have told you all that is necessary for a stranger to know," said Mr. Granger. "You will please confine yourself to the case in hand hereafter, else I'll not employ you."

"Thank you. I am sorry if I offended. I'll try to be more careful in the future."

"I would advise you to do so."

After a little further conversation the detective withdrew. The moment the outer door closed upon his retreating form, a change came over the countenance of Erastus Granger.

His eyes shot fire, and his teeth became firmly set, while muttered words fell from his lips.

"That man! Who can he be? Have I met him before? What does he know of the past, and why was he so curious? Confound him, I don't think I'll employ him any great length of time. He's altogether too inquisitive. I'll speak to Rollin, and tell him to send the fellow adrift. The stolen money must be found, however, and I'm afraid Huntway won't be able to find the thieves."

While the old cattle-king was thus soliloquizing another visitor was announced. It proved to be Rollin Longwood. His handsome countenance wore a grave expression, as he came in and sat down near his partner.

"Well?" questioned Granger.

"The detective is at work," answered Rollin. "He's already in Pine Forks, and means business."

"I suppose so."

"He has made some discoveries."

"Ah!"

"Come here to tell you about them."

"Has this Steele Sharp made a confidant of you, Rollin?"

"He has."

"That's more than he was willing to do with me, the rascal!" exclaimed Granger, crabbedly. "To tell you the truth, Rollin, I don't think much of your detective, and am inclined to regard him as a boaster, who never yet detected a criminal. I won't trust him."

"Ah, but you have formed a wrong idea of the man, sir," declared the young partner. "Steele Sharp has made a great reputation. There's not his equal in the West."

"Don't you believe that," sneered Granger. "I don't like the looks of the fellow at all."

"Ah, but you have not seen him, Erastus. Wait—"

"Oh, yes, I have," the old cattle-king interrupted, quickly. "He was here not ten minutes since, and had a talk with me about the case."

Rollin Longwood seemed surprised. For some seconds he sat regarding his partner in silence.

"Do you mean to tell me that Steele Sharp called here to-night?" questioned Rollin, repressing his feelings with an effort.

"I mean exactly that."

"What sort of a person was he?"

"Short and stout, with a big mustache and the keenest pair of eyes I ever beheld."

"Indeed!"

Mr. Longwood seemed deeply moved, and did not fix his gaze on the face of his partner for some time. At length he said:

"The detective is in Pine Forks, and did not intimate to me that he was going to call on you. He has been to the jail and interviewed Grudge. The man made a confession."

"A confession!"

Erastus Granger dropped his lame leg from its perch on the chair in front of him and half-started to his feet. He seemed to forget all rheumatic pain under a terrible excitement.

"Sit down, Erastus," said the younger man. "Don't excite yourself. It was natural enough that one villain should turn State's evidence to screen himself—"

"It's a lie! a base falsehood! Grudge Grave has not confessed. If he has, he's a liar anyhow!" vociferated Mr. Granger, flushed and angry, much to the astonishment of his partner.

"You surprise me, Erastus," cried Rollin Longwood. "I didn't know that you had heard the confession."

The eyes of the speaker fixed themselves on the face of his partner in a way that was unpleasant. Granger sunk back to his seat, flushed and confused.

"Confound it!" he growled, "I don't know what ails me: I guess the loss of that money has turned my brain. Of course I am glad if the prisoner has confessed. Has he revealed the

hiding-place of the money and who were his accomplices?"

Mr. Granger was calm enough now, and the flush on his countenance had given place to a deep pallor, while the hands clutching the arms of his chair twitched nervously, a fact that did not escape the notice of Rollin.

"What his confession was I cannot say. I did not hear it."

"You did not hear it?"

"No. Steele Sharp knows what it is, and at present he keeps his own counsel. The detective, however, intrusted this to me for you—a note from the prisoner."

With the words Rollin Longwood laid a bit of soiled paper on the knee of his partner. The latter took it, and adjusting his glasses, he glanced at a few rudely-scrawled words.

After reading them, he held out the paper to Rollin and said:

"I suppose you know what it is?"

"I did not read it. Shall I do so now?"

"Certainly."

And the younger partner read:

"'RAST GRANGER:—Jest you come to see me. I don't like layin' in jail. Mum's the word."

"GRUDGE."

The scrawl was rude, and ungrammatical, yet it conveyed a hidden meaning that one interested could well understand.

"I sha'n't go near him," declared Mr. Granger. "I don't see why he should send for me. The low scoundrel!"

"I would advise you to go," returned Rollin. "You could ride over in your buggy. You may learn something of importance."

"Perhaps. I'll think about it," decided the old cattle-king, and soon after Rollin Longwood took his departure.

The moment he had reached the outer air, the young man struck his clinched fist against his breast and uttered an ejaculation of anger and surprise.

"There's something rotten in Denmark, surely!" he declared. "Detective Sharp has visited Granger, has he? I don't understand this. The description he gave knocks me silly. There must be more than one detective at work. There's music in the air, and no mistake, and it'll be lively music before long, or I'm much mistaken."

Mr. Longwood roomed at the principal public house in the place, which was situated not far from the log jail. Just before he reached the tavern he met a man whose appearance affected him strangely.

CHAPTER VII.

A STARTLED MAN.

It was late in the afternoon when a vehicle halted in front of the log jail in Pine Forks.

Tim Quales was the driver, and he assisted his master to alight.

Mr. Granger seemed to forget his rheumatism as he hurried forward to meet the young sheriff who stood at the door.

"Certainly you may see the prisoner, Mr. Granger," assured the young man, who, as the reader knows, was extremely anxious to placate the old cattle-king.

As the two men entered the log structure, a third personage glided from a corner of the building and pushed open the door, following silently after. We have seen the last man before, the same who had called on Erastus Granger, representing himself as Steele Sharp, the great detective.

It became necessary to light a lamp, as the interior of the jail was quite dark. A narrow corridor ran the width of the jail, with cells on one side, each cell door being constructed of heavy oak plank.

"I'll lock you in and retire to the outside, Mr. Granger," said Clifford Huntway. "You will then have full liberty, and may get a confession from the prisoner. You know he may peach to save himself."

"All right," agreed the cattle-king. "When I thump on the wall you come and let me out."

"Certainly."

Soon after the great man of Pine Forks was shut in with the prisoner the third man glided from the shadows at the further end of the corridor and listened intently. A murmur of voices reached his ear. Kneeling, he placed his eye to the keyhole.

He could see but a small portion of the interior, and by the dim light burning from a tin lamp that Mr. Granger had taken into the cell with him, the prowler was unable to make out anything distinctly.

After a moment the eavesdropper removed his

eye, and placed his ear to the keyhole, through which most of the conversation floated.

"You're in a bad fix, Grudge."

"I reckon, sir, but you mou't help me."

"I can't do that. What did you do with the money?"

"I haven't got it."

"Don't tell me that. I know better," declared the cattle-king, sternly. "If you want leniency you may as well make a clean breast of this business to me."

"I dunno," muttered Grudge. "I kin swear I hain't got ther money now, even if I had it once."

"I am aware that no money was found on your person, or in your cabin, Grudge," pursued the cattle-king, "but you had the money at one time, you dare not tell me you did not."

"I admit that. Some one robbed me jest the same, and I'm half-minded to believe you put up a job on me, boss."

"I? Impossible."

The conversation then fell to a lower key. But little of it escaped the ear of the eavesdropper, and he heard some revelations that were of the utmost moment.

When at length the cattle-king thumped on the door to recall the sheriff the prowler at the door glided aside, and when the sheriff came to release Mr. Granger, the third party slipped past and crept silently into the open air. As he came forth, a light from across the way touched his countenance, revealing a pale and troubled face.

"I have made a most important discovery to-night," soliloquized the detective, "a discovery that may lead to important results. At any rate, I am on the trail to stick till the robbers of the cattle-king's messenger are brought to justice."

"Hello, thar!" called Tim, as the detective moved past.

Sharp did not answer, however. For some reason he was just now anxious not to be found in the vicinity of the jail. He hurried away, not toward the village, but down toward the lower hills south of Pine Forks.

He had pushed on past the last hut, and was in a lonely region, with the great hills towering up like giants on one side, a dim outspread of rocks and trees on the other.

A new moon was dipping toward the horizon, rendering the night less dark than it would otherwise have been.

Steele Sharp hesitated here and glanced about him as if expecting to see some one. If such was his desire, he was not to be disappointed. A dark form rose suddenly and confronted him.

Steele Sharp recoiled.

"Who are you?" he demanded, laying his hand on a pistol-butt.

"I am Steele Sharp—you are an impostor!" hissed the stranger.

The next instant a pistol gleamed in the face of the man from Helena.

Instantly the weapon was swept aside, and a hand clutched the massive beard of the would-be assassin. The hirsute appendage came off in the detective's hand!

"Hal! I thought so!" exclaimed Sharp.

On the instant the two men closed in a desperate struggle for the mastery. Back and forth they reeled and struggled, across the rocks, treading bushes down and sending stones rattling into the depths of a gulch close at hand.

"You shall never live after this!" grated the detective's assailant.

Not a word fell from the lips of Sharp. He panted and struggled with the fury of desperation, and it soon became evident that his assailant was gaining the mastery.

Nearer and nearer to the edge of the gulch the two went in their struggles, and it became evident that one or both would soon plunge into the deep canyon.

"Mercy!"

It was a wail of despair.

The sound of rattling pebbles and falling of a heavy body fell on the evening air, then all was still.

The struggle was over. But one of the combatants stood there in the faint moonlight. He panted and seemed very nearly winded.

"My soul! but it was a desperate struggle," muttered the survivor.

Then he approached and peered into the seemingly bottomless gulch. All was black and silent below. A faint murmur of water was all the sound that filled the evening air, and this failed to tell of the awful tragedy that had just taken place.

"He won't trouble me in the future, thank

Heaven for that!" muttered the man, as he felt about for the false beard that the hand of the detective had torn from his face.

He found and readjusted it, then peered into the gulch.

"I wonder if he was really the noted Montana Detective, or was he an impostor!" mused the man. "In any event, he's out of the way. I'll not trouble myself to look after the body; let the buzzards do that."

The Humbug Detective tightened his belt, and without a backward glance hurried into Pine Forks, not pausing till he stood in front of the village hotel.

Although bearded like a pard, the man was handsome, and carried himself bravely. He entered the somewhat pretentious public house, and at once proceeded to the desk of the clerk.

"I would stop with you for the night," said the stranger.

The obliging clerk shoved the soiled register toward the stranger.

The latter glanced up and down the page ere he touched pen to paper. He studied each name carefully, then took the pen and wrote, in a running hand:

"Steele Sharp, Montana."

The young man watched the movement of the stranger's pen, and seemed surprised when he read the name.

"I'll give you the best room in the house, Mr. Sharp," said the smiling clerk, confidentially. "Any game in this quarter, sir?"

Before the man from Helena could reply a low cough at his elbow caused him to turn about with a feeling that some one had been looking over his shoulder while he wrote his name.

The man writing himself Steele Sharp recoiled, his face blanched.

Before him stood his late antagonist whom he thought at the bottom of the gulch.

CHAPTER VIII.

BAFFLED BY FIRE.

"I AM glad to see you, Mr. Sharp."

The last comer held out his hand, a smile playing over the pale face that was spotted with blood.

The big-bearded man seemed puzzled and undecided what to do. At length he held out his hand, and shuddered as he felt that of the other, cold as ice, in his palm.

For some moments eyes looked into eyes, in one pair a hidden menace, in the other a look of doubt and perhaps fear.

"Aren't you glad to see me, Mr. Sharp?" demanded the shorter man, insinuatingly. "You ought to be. You know the murderer is not often able to—"

"Hush!" gasped the last Steele Sharp, huskily. "Keep a still tongue in your head. Come with me."

The speaker turned away, and he knew that he was followed.

"Wait here one moment."

The bearded man returned quickly to the clerk's desk and procured the key to his room with instructions about finding it, then he went back to his companion. The two mounted the stairs together.

Once in his room, Steele Sharp the second, locked the door, lit a lamp, and threw himself into a wooden chair.

"Now, young man, tell me what all this means," he demanded, in a voice of forced calmness. At the same time he produced a cigar, bit off the end, and proceeded to light it with great deliberation. He was evidently affecting a calmness he did not feel.

This fact was patent to the man who was watching the pretended detective's movements keenly.

"You know me, do you not?" questioned the first detective.

"I do not."

"We met but a short time ago, sir, and but for good luck I would have been killed. I caught on a shelf not ten feet from the brink of the gulch, and was soon able to follow you to this place. Tell me what you mean, sir, by calling yourself Steele Sharp."

"That is my name," returned the other, puffing coolly at his cigar. "As I said when we first met to-night, you are an impostor."

For full a minute the standing man made no reply. Perhaps the cool assumption of the other dumfounded him. He found his voice at length, however, and said:

"You are a cool villain. There is but one Steele Sharp in Montana and I am he. Do you dare me to the proof?"

The keen eyes of the speaker fixed themselves in a penetrating gaze on the face of the bearded smoker.

The latter did not flinch.

"You are a fool, young man, to think of butting against me," declared Sharp number two. "I am here at the request of Granger & Longwood, and I do not mean to be bluffed off the track. I am aware that the great reward offered by Mr. Granger for the capture of the man or men who robbed and murdered his messenger is a temptation that has led a score of would-be detectives to take the trail, and I am not surprised that you should attempt to murder me, that you and those of your ilk might have full swing. Take my advice, young man, and go about your business before you lose your precious life."

The speaker was cool and impudent.

Detective Number One leaned against the wall and regarded the other fixedly while he talked. His face was pale, his teeth clinched, while his hands worked nervously on the heavy cane that he carried.

"So, then, it is to be war between us," finally articulated the younger. "I am sorry. I have been to Helena, and from there came on here on learning of the robbery of Granger & Longwood's messenger. I am the only authorized detective on the trail; you are the impostor, and it will be well for you to beware."

"You are a liar!" thundered the sitting man, flinging aside his cigar, and starting to his feet with his hand on the butt of a revolver.

"Sit down!"

"Eh? Yes, yes; of course."

And the bearded detective dropped like lead into his seat, a polished six-shooter flashing in his face.

It was a keen eye that glanced along the barrel of the weapon, and the bearded man's face changed color. He realized that he was overmastered.

"There! you are sensible," said the man behind the revolver. "You attempted to murder me to-night. If you are what you pretend, you are anything but an honorable detective. I think Granger & Lockwood can dispense with your services."

"I don't propose to consult your likes and dislikes in the matter," declared the other doggedly. "I have been regularly employed, and mean to pursue my own way without regard to you."

"Indeed! You will please remove that beard."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say. Take off that false beard. I am in deadly earnest and will brook no delay," cried the young detective sternly.

The hammer of his revolver was raised, and the man felt himself in a critical situation. To reveal himself to this man might ruin his plans utterly.

"Put up your pistol," he urged, "this is taking an unfair advantage, one that I would scorn to take of any man, even an enemy."

"Will you remove your disguise?"

"No."

For an instant this defiance seemed to daze the man with the revolver, whom we have known as Steele Sharp.

"I am compelled to use force then," declared he. "I mean to know who you are, impostor!"

The speaker advanced a step.

The man in the chair nerved himself for what he believed a coming struggle, when an interruption broke the spell.

"Fire! Fire!"

The cry rung through the rude border tavern, and startled the inmates, who came flocking from their rooms. Steele Sharp turned at the sound, and the man in the chair took instant advantage of the situation. He bounded to his feet, and dealt the young detective a blow that staggered him against the wall. Before Sharp could recover, Detective Number Two flung open the door and rushed from the room, closing and locking the door behind him.

"There!" hissed the bearded man, "roast like a rat in a trap, you miserable sneak! I'll win this game now if I have to sacrifice all the lives in Pine Forks!"

Then the man hurried away.

It was evident that he supposed the tavern on fire when he rushed out.

Steele Sharp soon recovered himself, and sprang to the door to find it secured. At once the detective understood the situation. His enemy meant that he should perish in the burning building.

In spite of his danger, the detective smiled, and strode to the window.

"He must imagine me a weakling to think I

will perish when there is an avenue open for escape," muttered the imprisoned man.

He flung up the window and gazed out into the night. If he thought to gaze upon smoke and flame issuing from the tavern he was agreeably disappointed.

There was a brilliant illumination outside, however, but it proceeded from across the street.

Steele Sharp soon ascertained that it was the jail.

"A part of the plot!" he exclaimed. "Grudge Grave will escape in the confusion. This pretended detective is a humbug, and I knew it. He is a friend and partner of the man in the jail. I must not permit the plot to succeed."

Glancing about him, the detective saw a rope coiled over the post of the bedstead. It was but the work of a moment for him to make one end of this fast, and the other he tossed outside.

Securing the sash with a stick, Steele Sharp crawled over the sill and lowered himself to the ground without difficulty.

He hurried at once into the street to find a large crowd gathered. The detective glanced about, seeking a familiar face. He saw none. His late antagonist, who had so neatly escaped unmasking on account of the fire, was nowhere visible.

"He has made himself scarce, of course," muttered the detective. "His business here was to release his partner in crime. Has he succeeded? I'll investigate."

The jail was one mass of flame now, and if the prisoner had not escaped, or been led away, he had surely perished in the fire.

Even as the detective moved toward the flaming building, a wild scream rent the air that curdled the blood of the listeners.

That one shriek was all. The sound of crackling flames alone was heard thereafter. The jail burned rapidly, and was soon but a mass of smoldering embers.

"Where is the sheriff?"

A pale-faced man asked the question, as he parted the crowd and hurried forward to the glowing embers of the jail. His hand fell on the arm of Steele Sharp.

The latter recognized the speaker as Rollin Longwood.

"I cannot tell you, sir," returned the detective. "I haven't seen him since the fire began."

"I just came from his boarding-place. He's not there. Has the prisoner escaped? How did the fire take place?"

The detective could not answer. Just then he was spellbound by an awful fear.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DETECTIVE'S FALL.

HAD the young sheriff perished in the burning jail? This was the thought that entered the soul of the man from Helena, and saddened and alarmed him.

Mr. Longwood made inquiries of others with regard to Huntway, but not a soul seemed to have seen him since night had fallen. The thought that entered Steele Sharp's brain was, that young Huntway had entered the jail to see his prisoner, and had been knocked down and left to perish in the fire, set, undoubtedly, by the hand of the prisoner while fleeing from the jail.

On account of such thoughts the man from Helena was in anything but a pleasant state of mind. He became exceedingly nervous during the next few minutes.

As soon as the heat would permit, willing hands were at work examining the debris, in search of anything that might be found.

At length a sharp exclamation fell from many lips. A human skeleton was raked from the ashes, and laid at the feet of Rollin Longwood and Steele Sharp.

"So the prisoner was burned, it seems," said the young cattle-king. "It was a terrible fate, even for such a man as Grudge Grave. I know he had some good streaks about him. However, this will save a trial, and one tough is effectually removed from the community."

Steele Sharp did not like the ring in the voice of the cattle-king. It seemed heartless in the extreme, in spite of the fact that he spoke a good word for the dead outlaw.

"I am not so sure that the skeleton is that of Grudge Grave," said the detective.

"Not sure?" inquired the young cattle-owner, in surprise. "I was not aware that the jail contained another prisoner than Grudge Grave, the highwayman."

"I believe he was the only prisoner," admitted Steele Sharp.

"Then, of course, the skeleton is his."

"Not necessarily," avowed the man from Helena. "There's a mystery surrounding this night's work that needs explaining. How came the jail to take fire?"

"Of course I cannot answer that, but I presume a friend of the prisoner set fire to it, in the hope of effecting a rescue."

"I hope your surmise is correct," returned the man-hunter, "but I am afraid the sheriff and not the prisoner fell a victim to the flames."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Longwood. "I had not thought of anything so horrible. I may have wronged the sheriff, but it certainly entered my mind that he had been negligent of duty, and thus permitted the destruction of the jail. Clifford is my friend, and I would not wrong him by unjust suspicion. Your suggestion fairly shocked me. This affair needs investigating."

"It does," returned the detective.

Rollin Longwood bent forward and touched the arm of the man from Helena, peering quizzically into his face.

"You are a stranger here, sir?"

"Comparatively," admitted Sharp.

"Where from?"

"Recently from Helena."

"Ah! It strikes me that your face is familiar. I have it now, you are the detective."

The eyes of Mr. Longwood searched the face of Sharp keenly. The detective stood as calm as an icicle through the investigating gaze.

"Are you not Steele Sharp?"

"I am," admitted the man from Helena.

"I am glad to meet you again, sir. Your disguise is complete," said Longwood. "I should not have suspected you, had your face not been a strange one. You detectives are sharp, and no mistake."

At the last Rollin Longwood laughed, seeming well pleased, while his white hand continued to press the detective's arm. The latter was puzzled at the words of the young cattle-king. He gazed at the white fingers clutching his arm, gazed as if fascinated, for a moment, then looked away and said:

"I don't quite understand you, sir."

"Oh, no, of course not," and a finger nudged Sharp between the ribs. "With all your cuteness you cannot fool me, Mr. Sharp. Your make-up is perfect, however, absolutely perfect. You don't look one bit like the Mr. Sharp who visited me this afternoon. I hope you are making discoveries."

And now Steele Sharp understood. It was the other detective claiming his name who had interviewed the young Montana cattle-king. The detective was deeply puzzled to know who and what the fellow was. He was keen enough not to reveal the true situation to Rollin Longwood, but fell in with his view of the case at once.

"I am making some most important discoveries, Mr. Longwood," answered Sharp.

"Ah! that's good. Tell me about them, sir. You know you promised to make me your confidant," declared Longwood, good-humoredly, his hand now caressing the shoulder of the detective, in a patronizing way that displeased the Helena man not a little.

"Not yet, Mr. Longwood. I am not ready."

"Then you go back on your promise. But I forgive you. Detectives are queer people, anyhow, and one must expect to be snubbed by them. They are what might be termed privileged characters."

Steele Sharp made no reply. His eyes were fixed on a face dimly revealed beyond the smoking ruins. The face attracted him strangely, and as he saw it move away, he turned and followed swiftly and silently.

Soon the man of many trails found himself far from the scene of the burning jail, shadowing the man who had ventured to pause a brief moment and peer at the ruin wrought by the fire. The man did not seem to know that he was followed, since he never once looked back, but pressed on into the hills. For perhaps a mile he hurried along a winding path, then he came to a sudden halt and uttered a low cry—the cry of a night-hawk.

In answer a man stepped from the bushes and confronted the night prowler.

"Well, Zonk?"

"Big time 'mong the fellers, and I 'spect you're safe enough now, Grudge."

"Good! I'll never go back on you, even in thought, ag'in, Tub. You've done me a good turn, and got me outen the meshes o' ther law, and now we'll get even with some folks in Pine Forks 'at I knows on, eh, Tub?"

"You bet yer sweet life, Grudge," was the emphatic answer, and the two men joined hands in the starlight.

"Now, Tub, yer think they'll find ther dead man, and reckon it's me?"

"Sart'in."

"Cute, durn cute in you, Tub, I vow it was," chuckled the escaped prisoner.

Then they moved away, following an ill-defined trail that led more deeply into the hills. After a little time the two men suddenly disappeared, as though the earth had swallowed them up.

The man-hunter was puzzled.

He paused and examined the spot where they had disappeared.

Presently a murmur of voices fell on his ear, and following the sound the detective came to a fringe of bushes, beyond which the sound was plainly heard.

Parting the bushes, Steele Sharp found himself on the edge of a small basin, the sides of which were precipitous. A fire smoldered at the bottom of the shaft, and one of the men was poking it into new life with a stick. The renewed flame lit up the interior of the place, revealing the faces of the two men plainly.

The man called Tub Zonk was tall and slender, with a smooth, dark face, straight hair, and penetrating black eyes. He looked like an Indian, and the watching detective set him down as a half-blood, the most cunning people to be found in the West.

The brink of the basin was fringed with bushes, which formed a complete mask to the place. A lariat, dangling from the rocky side, showed how the two men had entered the shaft.

Evidently they imagined themselves safe enough here, and conversed without the least apparent concern.

"I distrust ye, Tub," said the late prisoner, continuing a conversation that had been going on before the detective reached the place.

"And why did ye distrust me, Grudge?"

"Because, ye see, I had the swag in my own fingers, and was jest selfish enough ter want ter keep it to myself. Bein' so selfish, I lost the whole on't."

"And sarved ye right, pard," avowed Zonk, as he tossed more wood on the fire. "I'd never 'a' went back on you thet-a-way, Grudge."

"I reckon you wouldn't, Tub."

"No, I wouldn't. But what became o' the money?"

"Dunno."

"Hain't it been found?"

"I reckon not."

"Tell me about it, Grudge."

The late prisoner then told the story of his losing the money in his possession, and of the manner in which it had been taken from him.

"I'm blessed ef I know who knocked me over thet night and got the swag. Et mou't 'a' been the feller thet I took it from."

"Sure. Who was he, pard?"

"Dunno."

"You've been a fool, Grudge, a pesky, downright fool!" avowed the half-breed, bluntly. "Ef you'd 'a' trusted me, az has allus been yer friend, we might have the swag now, and be on our way to Frisco, to live like gentlemen, allus."

"'Twa'n't you 'atsent the warnin' through the winder, then?"

Before Tub Zonk could answer, an object shot down from above, crashing between the two villains, scattering the firebrands like chaff.

It was Steele Sharp, who had fallen unexpectedly into the basin.

CHAPTER X.

IN DEADLY PERIL.

THE two villains were startled beyond measure at the fall of the man between them. Both sprung aside as if frightened, and for fully a minute not a word was uttered. Perhaps the men imagined they were to be assaulted by enemies from above.

Grudge Grave was the first to speak:

"Did the lightnin' hit yer, Tub?"

"Mi-sed by er squeak," declared the other. Then both men moved forward. Each grasped a revolver.

When they stood over the body of a man, a sense of relief entered both hearts.

"It's a man, Tub."

"Sure's ye'r born, Grudge."

A groan from the object on the ground assured the two toughs that the man still lived.

"Who in nater kin it be, pard?" queried Zonk.

"I never see'd him afore. Do ye know 'im, Grudge?"

"I don't, but I reckon he ain't here for no good. He must 'a' been watchin' us. He mou't be er detective."

This intimation from the late prisoner suggested an unpleasant train of thought to the two

men. One of them shuffled the burning firebrands together, and soon had a blaze streaming up at one side of the basin. This illuminated the interior so that faces were plainly revealed.

Grudge Grave lent over the insensible detective. He did not seem to recognize his face, but on opening his coat, he discovered a silver badge of peculiar pattern. This discovery caused the investigator to utter a low ejaculation.

"What hev you diskivered, Grudge?"

"Look a-ber, pard," cried the other, as he removed the concealed badge.

"Wal, what is it? Oh! I see, a detective's badge!"

"The same. But this 'ere's a pecooliar bit o' silver," declared Grudge, as he held the badge up in the firelight. "I've see'd that 'ar bit o' silver before."

"E? Hev you?"

"Yes, I hev."

"Whar?"

"On the breast o' the boss man-hunter of Montana. I heerd he was sick at Helena, nigh unto death, but I swow hyar's his trade-mark, sure's ve'r born. Ef we hain't got a bonanza, then Grudge Grave don't know hisself."

At the last the fellow gave vent to a chuckle of delight.

His companion seemed somewhat mystified.

"Ther boss man-hunter?" he queried. "That must mean Steele Sharp. I 'low this hain't him."

"Wal, it be, jist the same," answered Grudge. "He'n his deputies hez made us a heap o' trouble, Tub. What shell we do with the skunk?"

"Mebbe he's did for as 'tis."

"No, he ain't. Such critters bez nine lives, like er cat. It's plain to be seen that ther critter bez been doggin' our steps, and mebbe heerd all 'at passed atween us."

"Like enough. We mus'n't let him get away and blab."

"Not much. We'll leave his carcass fer ther wolves ter monkey with. I'll go through his garments and see what he's got. He mayn't be ther great detective, but he's a deputy, which amounts to ther same thing. Up this 'ere way, a-lookin' inter ther robbery of old Granger's messenger, likely."

"Likely."

Grudge Grave was not long in going through the pockets of the stunned detective. He found a revolver, some money, and various papers. The latter he tossed on the fire. The money and revolver he appropriated for his own use.

After this the question of disposing of the detective presented itself.

"We mou't put him in the cave and let Tige loose," suggested Tub Zonk.

"Jest ther thing."

Grudge Grave placed his hand over the heart of the detective, to find that it still beat, and then he lifted the insensible man in his arms.

"Open ther door, Tub, and we'll drop the gentleman into his little bed. Don't keep me waiting."

The man addressed sprung forward, and with some difficulty pushed aside a stone composing part of the wall of the basin, revealing the entrance to a cave. Grudge was obliged to stoop in order to enter.

Passing forward a short distance, Grudge deposited his burden on the ground, at the side of a considerable chamber.

"Thar," he muttered, "I think we'll leave you here for the present. When we return I reckon thar'll be one detective less to bother men of these mountains."

In the mean time the second villain hurried to another part of the cave, ignited a torch, and proceeded to open an oak door, that was secured by a heavy padlock.

"Better git to ther entrance, Grudge," called Zonk, warningly. "You know Tige hain't had much to eat lately, and he's ugly. I'll keep him off with the torch till I git to ther door."

Casting a glance over his shoulder at the weird picture presented by the flaring torch, Grudge Grave hurried to the stone door that covered the entrance to the cave, and here, with his hand on a hidden spring, he waited the further movements of his companion.

The heavy plank door finally swung open. A low, blood-curdling growl echoed down the length of the cave. From his position at the entrance, Grudge Grave saw a pair of gleaming eyeballs just beyond the opening to the animal's den.

The torch-bearer suddenly retreated. Thrusting his burning torch into a crevice in the rock at the side of the cave, Zonk hurried to the side of his evil companion. Here he paused for a moment to watch the movements of the savage

brute he had just given the freedom of the cave.

With a fierce snarl the animal leaped through the open door of its den, and advanced toward the spot where lay the apparently insensible detective. Before reaching the prostrate man, the brute—an enormous black panther—halted, crouched low, and lashed its sides with its long tail.

"Come," whispered Grudge, huskily, "let's not remain another moment. See the devil in Tige's eyes! He's mad, and wouldn't know his friends from Adam."

Zonk did not move, however, but watched the panther as if fascinated. At length the animal retreated with an angry growl.

"You put ther torch too nigh the cur," growled Grudge. "Tige won't touch our man; he's 'fraid o' ther light."

"The torch 'll soon burn out," returned Zonk, "so it's only the question o' a few minutes anyhow."

Then he signified his willingness to depart from the cave, Grudge Grava being only too glad to do so. Once they reached the basin, and saw the stone swing slowly back to place, the two breathed easier.

"We'll come ag'in to-morrer," said Zonk. "Old Tige 'll be tame enough then, arter the good meal he makes off'n the detective galoot."

"That's er fact."

Grudge Grava shinned up the lariat, quickly followed by his companion. Without a word they hurried away in the darkness, all unmindful of the fact that a pair of keen human eyes was watching their every movement.

In the mean time, Steele Sharp, who had become semi-conscious before his two captors left the cave, soon became aware of his terrible position. He rolled over and raised himself to his elbow, in which position he could look the black panther square in the face.

It was not a question, however, of looking the ferocious animal out of countenance; the detective knew that that could not be done. The question was, could he escape from the cave before the torch gave out? If he could not, he was doomed.

Steele Sharp came fully to realize this, as he reclined on the hard ground and gazed into the fiery eyeballs blazing just beyond the circle of light.

Slowly he sat up.

A terrific growl warned him that the panther was aware of his movements, and was anxious to thwart an effort on the detective's part to escape.

Meantime the flame of the torch began to grow dim. Sharp realized that he must do something at once.

He felt for his revolver. He did not find it.

"I have been robbed!" he ejaculated. "I remember now of losing my balance and falling into the basin. I must have lost consciousness. This seems to be a cave, doubtless opening into the basin. If I can only secure yonder torch, I may be able to escape by the entrance."

Sharp had been sufficiently aroused to know when the two toughs left the cave, and he knew they had left him to perish at the claws and teeth of the imprisoned panther. He did not believe either of the wretches was far away, yet of course they were at a safe distance, waiting the outcome.

Slowly the man-hunter rose to his feet, unheeding the alarming growls of the panther. Between himself and the animal flared the now nearly extinguished torch.

"I must get possession of that torch," declared the detective, putting out his hand and advancing cautiously.

His movement brought forth a furious snarl from the panther, and to his alarm Sharp saw the creature crouch for a spring.

Feeling that he had gone too far to recede now, Steele Sharp sprang quickly forward, almost in the face of the panther, and snatched the torch from the crevice.

In jerking it loose, one end of the torch struck a projection that sent it flying from the hand of the detective, almost at the feet of the black panther.

Steele Sharp started backward with a cry of deadly terror. He saw the angry brute gather itself and leap full at his throat!

CHAPTER XI.

GIVEN THE LIE.

STEELE SHARP believed that his doom was sealed as the panther leaped at his throat, and yet the instinct of self-preservation was strong upon him. He fell flat upon his side in the hope

to avoid the treacherous animal. At the same moment a stunning report filled the subterranean chamber.

The detective lay half stunned, a blow from one of the panther's paws tearing the cloth of his pantaloons-leg, as the brute came to the floor. The detective gazed in astonishment to see the brute writhing as if in the agonies of death, and in the close atmosphere was a strong smell of burnt powder.

"Back! or the brute'll mangle you," cried a voice, accompanied by a grasp of the arm.

By main strength a hand dragged Steele Sharp from the dangerous vicinity.

The torch was still sputtering dimly, as Sharp staggered to his feet and confronted his rescuer, who held a light Winchester rifle in his hand.

"Who are you?" questioned the astonished detective.

"Don't you know me, young man?"

With the words the speaker ignited a match, and peered smilingly into the detective's face.

"Ah!" exclaimed Sharp, "I have seen you, and it gives me great relief to know that you are still in the flesh, Mr. Huntway," and the detective emphasized his words by grasping and wringing his rescuer's hand warmly.

It was indeed the sheriff, whom Steele Sharp had feared perished in the burning jail.

"Wait one moment," said the sheriff. "There must be other torches in the cave than the one burning there on the floor, and I will find one."

Huntway examined the sides of the cavern, and soon put his hand on what he wanted. By means of another match he had a second torch going, and by its light examined the animal, which had now ceased its struggles. A bullet from the sheriff's rifle had crashed through the panther's brain.

"A black panther," said Huntway. "Not many such brutes in Montana. An ugly pet, I should say."

The sheriff then explained how he had made his way into the cave in time to save the detective's life.

"I discovered the basin outside a few days ago, and from indications I judged that it had been lately occupied. For this reason I resolved to investigate at the earliest opportunity. This afternoon I left Pine Forks on a secret mission, to search more thoroughly in the vicinity where the messenger was robbed. It was late before I returned, and I took a by-path to the Forks, thus saving something in distance."

"Just before I reached the vicinity of the basin, I heard voices. Dismounting and secreting my horse in a thicket, I crept forward, and discovered two men in conversation. They were talking about a man, a detective, whom they had entrapped and left to perish at the jaws of a hungry panther. I at once determined to effect a rescue, although I was anxious to learn all possible about the two villains, one of whom I discovered to my surprise was Grudge Grave, a fellow whom I had left safely locked in Pine Forks jail. How he had escaped was of course a puzzle to me."

"The jail was set on fire, and during the excitement Grave escaped, I suppose," explained Sharp. "A skeleton was found in the ruins, and I feared it might be yours."

"The jail burned? That is bad," cried Huntway. "In more senses than one is it bad. I will be blamed, as I was away. I was seeking information with which to convict Grudge Grave, however, and left a deputy to look after the jail. It seems he must have been negligent of duty. I must hurry my return to Pine Forks."

The sheriff seemed considerably moved. He would have said nothing further about himself had not Steele Sharp reminded him that he had not yet explained how he came so opportunely to the rescue.

"It won't take but a minute to tell that," said Huntway. "I knew exactly where to find the shaft, and learning from the conversation of the two men that the cave opened into this, I hurried on foot to the basin, lowered myself by a lariat I found suspended at the side, and then began a hasty search for the entrance."

"To my great joy I found the opening. It seems that in their hurried exit the two villains neglected to close the heavy stone properly, and it swung open undiscovered by them. I at once entered the cave, rifle in hand, and by the dim light of the fallen torch sent a bullet into the head of the panther."

The explanation over, the two men proceeded to examine the cave. Nothing of importance was found, although Sheriff Huntway seemed to believe that the forty thousand dollars stolen

from the unfortunate Flake must be concealed somewhere about the place.

Reluctantly the detective and sheriff gave up the search, and retired from the cave. They were not without the fear that the two villains might return and surprise them in the darkness.

Nothing of the kind occurred, however, and in a little time the two men were on solid ground, beyond the basin.

Huntway led his horse from the thicket, and the two walked on in company for some distance. At length Steele Sharp halted, and said:

"I forget myself. I must go no further in this direction."

"Aren't you going back to Pine Forks?"

"No, my work lies in Helena just at present. I have been engaged by Granger & Longwood to ferret out the robbers of poor Flake, and, if possible, secure the return of the money."

"I am afraid it will be hardly possible to recover the money," said the sheriff. "I, too, am anxious to find the robbers, and hope we may work in unison, or at least that our rivalry may be of a generous nature."

"Rest assured it will be, my friend," said the detective. "You saved my life this night, and I shall never forget it. Friends we must be to the end, Clifford Huntway."

The man from Helena spoke with a good deal of feeling, at the same time putting out his hand.

It was a warm hand-clasp, and then the two separated. Steele Sharp stood beside the mountain trail, watching the receding horseman in the gloom. When the measured hoof-beats no longer fell on the air, Detective Sharp turned his face toward the capital of Montana, forgetting for the time that he was unarmed, only feeling a strange foreboding in his soul that it was impossible for him to shake off.

It was near midnight when the sheriff arrived at Pine Forks. He realized that he would be surely blamed for the destruction of the jail; this he had steeled himself to bear, but there was a blow coming of which he little dreamed.

One of the first men the sheriff met on the following day was Rollin Longwood. The face of the junior cattle-king was serious in expression.

Huntway could see at once that he was displeased.

"You suffered the prisoner to escape, or at least Grudge Grave is where he can never speak and tell who murdered poor Flake, and robbed him of his great treasure. If you were not my friend, Clifford, I'd hold you criminally culpable."

Thus did the young cattle-king greet the sheriff, and at once the latter resented it.

"I have not failed to do my duty as I understand it, Rollin Longwood," declared Huntway, angrily, "and I am not amenable to you in any event."

"But you are amenable to the laws of Montana," retorted Rollin, with a sneer. "Next fall we elect a new sheriff."

Fearing to trust himself with further speech, Clifford Huntway hurried from the presence of Longwood to the residence of Mr. Granger. The old cattle-king was too ill to see the sheriff that morning, and so Valeria entertained him. Flake was still breathing, but had not uttered an intelligible word.

For half an hour the young sheriff sat with Valeria, and felt himself in Eden. When at length he rose to go, she detained him a moment, clasping his hand tightly in hers. She had listened to his explanation of his absence, and did not blame him as others did for the events of the previous night.

"I see you do not wear the ring you once did, Clifford. Have you lost it?"

She glanced at the finger on which the ring, now safe in her pocket, had once glittered. She had determined to know the truth, and set at rest or confirm the awful suspicions that had haunted her since that night when an attempt had been made on the life of Flake.

"The ring," he said, as if not quite comprehending.

"Yes. Surely you haven't forgotten the beautiful ring, with the peculiar setting, you once permitted me to examine; the gift of a dear friend, you said, long since dead."

"Certainly," he returned, quickly. "How stupid of me not to remember. I lost the ring, and it has given me much concern."

"You lost it?"

Valeria's voice was husky, and her face suddenly paled.

"Yes, or else it was stolen. I think, perhaps,

the latter. I missed it about a week ago. I would be willing to pay a goodly sum for its return."

She regarded him fixedly. Was it confusion that sent the color into his cheek? She thought so, and her worst fears seemed realized.

Her hands fell her side, and she walked to the far side of the room. After that she did not speak, not even to return the farewell word he uttered, as he turned from the room.

"My soul! he is guilty!" moaned Valeria, sinking into a chair, her face pallid with the anguish that wrung her heart at that moment.

Soon after the departure of Sheriff Huntway, a bearded man appeared at the door, and requested to see Mr. Granger. Tim was away, so Valeria admitted the man. She had seen him once before, he having called to see her uncle, and she suspected that he was a detective.

Valeria went to her uncle, who told her to admit the gentleman at once, although not long before he had refused audience to the young sheriff.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Sharp," said Mr. Granger, the moment the detective entered the room. "Sit down and let's hear what you have discovered. Huntway was here, but I refused to see him."

"You did right, sir," returned the bearded man, who was no less a personage than the one who had encountered the first detective on the previous night, and denounced him as an impostor.

"I have become disgusted with the movements of the sheriff, and that impostor who personated you, Mr. Sharp. As I had never met you, of course it was easy enough to deceive me."

"Certainly. I have very important news today, news that may shock you, sir, yet it is nevertheless true."

"Something with regard to the late robbery?"

"Yes."

"I am anxious to hear it."

"I have found the robber and would-be assassin."

"Ah! news indeed! Who is he?"

Mr. Granger bent forward eagerly.

"One whom you would little suspect—Clifford Huntway!"

"Ha! is this true?" gasped Granger.

"It is a lie!"

Both men started as the fierce words fell on their ears. Valeria confronted them, white and trembling.

CHAPTER XII.

VALERIA IS TRUE.

STEELE SHARP No. 2 sprang to his feet, and regarded the girl in astonishment. His surprise was evidently genuine. Mr. Granger stared, his rheumatic limb sliding from its elevated position to the floor, the pain, however, failing to affect him.

"Miss Granger, you here?" finally articulated the detective. "I'm astonished!"

"So am I," vociferated the old cattle-king, finding voice at length. "You have no right to call Mr. Sharp a liar, Valeria, and, besides, it is unladylike in the extreme."

Truly, her uncle had spoken the truth, and Valeria realized her position for the first time. Her soul had risen in defense of Huntway, and when she heard her lover accused of an awful crime, her indignation caused her to rush to his defense. She now realized her mistake, and was on the point of leaving the room, when the detective rose up suddenly and detained her with a gesture.

"I understand your feelings, miss," he said, with a half-smile that served only to anger her. "It is natural for a girl to stand up for her lover, even when she knows, as you must, that he is a guilty wretch. You have the evidence of his guilt, Miss Granger—a ring that you tore from his finger not many nights ago, when, in mask, the villain attempted to silence poor Flake, and I have evidence here that will aid in the conviction of the infamous sheriff who has deceived the public so long!"

With the words the detective held up a knife, that Valeria at once recognized as the one she had torn from the hand of the night-prowler, and afterward flung into a clump of bushes. How had the detective come into possession of it? How, indeed, had he learned of the ring that was even now burning a hole in her hand that she had thrust into her pocket? Valeria had told no one about either the ring or the knife.

Mr. Granger learned of these things for the

first time, and he now demanded of his niece the meaning of all this.

She felt obliged to explain; and so, with her own lips, helped to confirm the guilt of Sheriff Huntway. In a moment of weakness she gave the ring into the detective's hand, and then fled, sobbing, from the room.

"It is a plain case, you see," avowed Steele Sharp No. 2. "I will now listen to what you may be pleased to advise, Mr. Granger."

"I advise the immediate arrest of Sheriff Huntway," returned the old cattle-king, white with excitement. "I once respected that young man, and, through my influence and that of my partner, he got the office he now holds. He seems to have no sense of gratitude in his composition."

"Such miscreants never have," returned the detective. "I'll see that your wishes are carried out. My only fear is that, since the jail has been destroyed, and there's no strong place to put the prisoner, the people may rise up and take him from the officers. You know what that means?"

"Lynch law?"

"Yes."

"Let it come. I do not care," retorted the old cattle-king, vengefully.

The detective seemed elated at his success as he walked from the presence of Montana's great cattle-king.

In the mean time Sheriff Huntway found that his popularity had suddenly waned. It had in fact vanished in a single night, and dark looks were cast upon him from unexpected sources.

While many people thought the skeleton found in the ruins of the jail was that of Grudge Grave, a goodly number believed that a trick had been played on them, and that the sheriff had connived at the escape of the prisoner.

The news floated out that Flake, the wounded messenger, was dying, and this seemed to fire the floating element to fever heat.

Huntway noticed this feeling against himself, and wondered at it. Why should he be blamed for accidents, and for the suffering and death of Flake?

He had put his whole energies to finding out who assaulted and robbed the cattle-king's messenger, and so he wondered at the glowering looks cast upon him as the day advanced.

Knots of people gathered at different points in town, and seemed to discuss something of an important nature. When he would approach one of these gatherings, sudden silence would fall upon the men, and the sheriff wondered thereat. He was too proud to attempt to vindicate himself from what he deemed unjust censure, and when he went to his board-place he was consumed with inward wrath.

A knot of people dispersed suddenly as he approached, and still dark looks were cast at him from under lowering brows.

It was late in the day, and Huntway sat at an open window, smoking a cigar, his white teeth biting fiercely at times into the moist roll.

"I'll just stand this foolishness no longer," muttered he, suddenly, rising to his feet and tossing his half-burned weed aside. "Ah! here comes a female. It strikes me that her face is familiar."

Huntway went to the window, stepped through, and stood on one end of a long porch that ran the full width of the house. At the present moment no one but himself was on the porch. He regarded the swiftly approaching girl, puzzled at seeing her so far from home at this hour.

She came forward pantingly, and turned toward him a pair of pleading eyes, and a white face.

"Ah! Valeria, I did not anticipate this visit. I am honored—"

"Stop! Listen!" commanded she, with a gesture. "You must flee at once!"

"Indeed?" elevating his brows. "I don't know that I have anything to flee from. In any event the duty of the highest county officer is here, at his post of duty."

She came nearer, even venturing up the steps to his side.

"Oh, flee at once!" she pleaded, with a queer look, her hands suddenly seizing his arm. "They have planned to arrest you for murder and robbery! The whole town is aroused, and—the mob will tear you to pieces! Quick, or it will be too late!"

He could not help admiring her in the rôle of a friend. What would he not have given to call her wife! Her words seemed to explain what had puzzled him all day. He did not understand why this feeling against himself, and he

felt disposed to face whoever might come, courageously. Flight in the face of a mob would be cowardly.

"Calm yourself, Valeria," he said, soothingly. "There is no danger. I am the highest county officer; they dare not arrest me."

"Ah! but you do not know. The detective has been active, there's not a road leading out of Pine Forks that is not guarded! He means that you shall not escape."

"He?"

"Steele Sharp."

Instantly the young sheriff thought of his adventure of the previous night. How could it be possible that the man whose life he had saved had turned against him? He did not utter his thoughts aloud, however. He was not prepared to believe the situation as bad as Valeria feared.

"Please don't alarm yourself, Valeria," he said. "They dare not harm me. I have done nothing for which I should feel ashamed. You speak of crime in connection with my name. Will you explain?"

"It is the ring that has done it, sir, that awful ring! and the detective has it. I was foolish enough to turn it over to him."

"My ring?"

He seemed surprised as he looked into her face.

"Your ring, Clifford. You know how I obtained it. When the truth comes out, they will hang you by law, if not by Judge Lynch. Heaven knows how I have suffered since that night you attempted to silence the wounded messenger with a knife. I've had the ring since. I—I cannot see you hang, Clifford. Flee for my sake, even though we never meet again. I know I am doing wrong, that I ought to turn against you, but—but I cannot. Don't delay. There are horses in the stable back of this house. Mount one and ride for your life!"

What was she saying in rapid tones while her soft hands clutched his arm? Somehow a vague idea of the truth dawned on his brain. He looked down the street and saw a crowd approaching. He could readily understand that something was wrong.

But to flee like a coward, that was not pleasant to contemplate.

"For your sake, you say, Valeria? Do you then care for me the least bit?"

He seized her hand and penetrated her with a keen gaze, full of smothered passion. Her pallid cheeks flushed and her head drooped.

He was answered, and his soul was thrilled at a look from her glorious eyes, as it had never been thrilled before. He raised her hand to his lips, then said, quickly:

"Do you believe me guilty of any crime, Valeria, even the least?"

No answer.

"Speak!" he demanded. "If you believe I could do a wrong action I will not stir from here, but die in my tracks if the worst comes!"

She looked up into his pale face and said:

"Tell me truly, are you innocent of this crime—the robbery and attempted murder of Jasper Flake?"

"I am innocent," he returned, without a quiver in his voice.

"I believe you, Clifford."

She put both hands confidently in his, while her eyes filled with tears.

"Heaven bless you, Valeria!"

He bent and kissed her, then turned as a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder and a stern voice said:

"Clifford Huntway, you are my prisoner!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A GIRL'S SHOT.

VALERIA uttered a cry of dismay.

The young sheriff looked into the dark face of a stranger. The fellow had evidently come from the house, doubtless entering by the back way, thus coming upon Huntway unawares.

"Hands off!" commanded the sheriff, in an indignant voice, at the same time backing a step and looking the man square in the eyes.

"Come peaceably, sir, and I may be able to get you to a place of safety before their mob comes," growled the man, who was almost a giant in size, and from his terrible presence had doubtless been selected for the work he was now engaged in.

"If you have set the mob upon officers of law, you are the one who will find yourself under arrest," cried Huntway, sternly. "Perhaps you have forgotten whom you are addressing. I am the sheriff of this county and the only man, save my deputies, authorized to make an arrest. Step aside and let me pass."

The burly man refused to yield an inch. Instead he displayed a pair of handcuffs.

"I'll put these on, and then we'll talk," said the fellow, grimly.

Valeria watched the two with a startled face. For the time she seemed utterly stunned. A crisis was near at hand, however, for a dark mass of human beings was seen hurrying toward the house, and it was now evident that this was the "mob" alluded to by the fellow who had attempted to arrest Huntway. Mischief was in the air surely, and the young sheriff realized that he must escape at once if he would.

Loth as he was to flee from a danger that he felt he had not invited, he yet believed that it was not his duty to permit himself to be sacrificed at the hands of a senseless mob.

He caught the appeal in the eye of Valeria, and that look nerved him to desperate measures.

"Stand aside," commanded Huntway, as the pretended officer moved to put on the handcuffs.

"Look out! He has a pistol!" called Valeria, warningly.

Scarcely had the words fallen from her lips than the man with the handcuffs went down like a log at the feet of Valeria.

One instant only did the sheriff pause to grasp the hand of the girl he loved. He looked into her eyes and said:

"For your sake, Valeria, I become a fugitive."

He pressed her hand an instant, then sprung over the prostrate form of the man he had felled and passed into the house.

By this time more than a score of men were in front of the house, rough, bearded fellows, some of them valiant through whisky that had been furnished freely by an interested party.

"Bring him out!" yelled a voice; "bring out the sheriff!"

Valeria had now regained her self-possession, and she halted the blear-eyed citizens at the porch and in a firm voice said:

"Come no further, gentlemen. The man you seek is not here."

"It's a lie! The young vagabond is in the house, hiding like the sneak he is!" vociferated the man whom Huntway had knocked down, just now staggering to his feet, but with rage at his attitude.

"It is not true. Mr. Huntway is not here," declared Valeria. "Stand back! You have no right to enter."

As the foremost of the mad mob attempted to rush past the girl he felt a cold ring of steel touch his forehead, and recoiled.

Valeria, white and determined, held the fort for the time being. The burly fellow who had given the girl the lie did not follow Huntway into the house, evidently fearing to do so.

He was a dastard at heart, and when he saw an opportunity he slipped up behind Valeria and threw his arms about her, pinioning her hands to her sides.

"Come on!" yelled the constable. "I've got the gal fast. She can't hurt you now."

In vain Valeria struggled. The mob saw their advantage and poured over the porch into the house. They did not find the object of their wrath within, however.

While they filled the place with oaths and rude ejaculations, a shout from the front of the house called many of them there.

A man on horseback had halted not twenty paces from the door, and stood regarding the horde with a calm mien. It was the hunted sheriff of Pine Forks. He had found the horse referred to by Valeria, and was bold enough to face the mob when once in the saddle.

"That's the critter now. Go for him!" yelled a voice.

"Hold!" called Huntway. "Men of Pine Forks, I am still your sheriff, and I have a right to be heard."

"Be jabers! listen to 'im!" cried irrepressible Tim Quailes, who had come out to look for Valeria at her father's request and had but lately arrived upon the scene.

Tim was a friend to Huntway and marveled at this display of wrath against the young sheriff.

"Shut up, you spalpeen!"

Tim brought the back of his hand across the mouth of a brawny fellow, who, quite tipsy, had yelled "Hang him!" at the top of his voice. The blow sent the inebriated individual sprawling on the ground. A laugh followed the tough's discomfiture.

"Men of Pine Forks," again called Huntway, "I am your sheriff still. I do not know why you have risen up to injure me and defy the law,

but I believe you have been deceived by some one who wishes me out of the way. Criminals hate and fear me. Will you permit yourselves to be led by such?"

"Hooray! Listen to him, lads, the darlint! Hooray for the sheriff!" yelled Tim Quailes at the top of his voice, tossing his old hat high in the air.

Yells and groans followed, and it was quite evident that the mob was not pacified.

Valeria had retired inside, but she stood at the window watching the movements outside with the most intense interest. She saw pistols in desperate hands, and trembled for the safety of the courageous young sheriff who had only consented to seek safety in flight to please her.

"Oh! why does he linger? They'll shoot him yet!" moaned the alarmed girl.

And then she saw a hand lifted, clutching a cocked revolver.

The man who leveled the weapon at the heart of Clifford Huntway was the one who had attempted his arrest.

Valeria almost fainted at the sight. There was murder in the man's heart. Huntway, all unconscious of treachery, sat his horse in the gathering gloom, a conspicuous mark for the assassin's bullet.

Valeria moved a little nearer.

Her own hand was raised swiftly. A single sharp report rang out.

A cry of pain followed, and the arm of the murderous constable fell helpless at his side, his revolver falling to the floor.

"Heaven forgive me," murmured Valeria, "it was to save his life that I did it."

At the report of the pistol great confusion prevailed.

"I'm shot! murder!" groaned the burly constable, and cries of "Huntway did it!" added to the rage of the mob.

Pistols cracked indiscriminately, and in the confusion the young sheriff galloped away.

With loud yells the half-drunken toughs rushed in pursuit, firing as they ran.

A grim smile swept the face of the hunted sheriff.

"Fools!" he muttered. "They're only wasting their powder now."

He made no effort to conceal his movements, but galloped down the main street, passing excited groups of citizens. At one point, in front of the Open Hand Saloon, a score of toughs were being addressed by an excited individual.

Huntway noticed the man carefully—it was Steele Sharp No. 2, although the fleeing sheriff did not know him then.

It was almost dark when Sheriff Huntway entered a mountain trail beyond the confines of Pine Forks.

He had slackened his pace, and had permitted his rein to fall loosely, when a man darted from the bushes, snatched the bridle and thrust a revolver into the horseman's face!

CHAPTER XIV.

ESCAPE AND CAPTURE.

"QUIETLY now," uttered the highwayman. "Lift a finger and you die!"

Rather a sudden and unpleasant announcement, truly. Sheriff Huntway did not lose his presence of mind for an instant. He recognized the man who had halted him and at once said, good-humoredly:

"Put up your gun, Sharp. One good turn deserves another, and you have repaid my services by setting the mob at my life. I ought to love you after this surely."

There was a sting in the words of Huntway that caused the highwayman to drop his hand from the bridle-rein as though it was hot iron.

"Bless me, I made a mistake, Mr. Huntway," exclaimed the man, who was indeed Steele Sharp whose life the sheriff had but lately saved at considerable risk to himself.

Sharp's revolver also fell at his side.

"Didn't you recognize me, Sharp?" queried the sheriff suspiciously.

"No. I thought you were a man for whom I have been looking for a long time."

"What man?"

"Never mind now, sheriff."

And Sharp forced a laugh.

"It was an awkward mistake, and I beg your pardon. I'd sooner cut off my right hand than offer harm to the best friend I have on earth."

There was no mistaking the earnestness of the detective's words, and the fugitive sheriff confessed himself puzzled.

Valeria had but this night assured him that Steele Sharp was at the bottom of the uprising against him, and now here was the detective

declaring himself his friend. Was he a hypocrite?

"I don't know whether to trust you or not," declared the sheriff after a moment given to reflection.

"Do you imagine I could be anything but your friend after what has happened, Mr. Huntway?" questioned Steele Sharp, in an injured tone. "I am looking after the man who robbed and attempted to murder Jasper Flake. Surely you and I ought to clasp hands on an issue of that kind, you being the sheriff of the county!"

Huntway was still puzzled.

Perhaps Valeria had been mistaken in her surmise regarding the detective. It seemed preposterous to believe that a man like the detective should be his enemy, since both were conservators of the peace. Perhaps jealousy actuated the man, professional jealousy, which sometimes is almost equal to that caused by the infatuation of love.

"I have been misinformed, Sharp," said Huntway, at length. "Although I am sheriff of this county *de jure*, I am at present not that officer *de facto*. You understand?"

And Huntway laughed unpleasantly.

"No, I do not understand."

The fugitive sheriff then explained the situation in a few words. An ejaculation fell from the detective's lips when Huntway had concluded.

"I understand it," he said, quickly. "The detective referred to by Valeria is the man calling himself Steele Sharp. He is an impostor. I have not yet dropped onto his game, but I do know that he is in disguise, and that he has succeeded in deceiving not only Rollin Longwood, but old man Granger as well. That man is not a detective. I am the only one who has a right to the name of Steele Sharp. There's a plot of some sort in the wind, and your ruin is a part of the programme, Mr. Huntway."

"It does look that way," admitted the sheriff.

"You have lifted a load from my mind, Sharp, and I feel better now."

"You will not fear to trust me hereafter?"

"I will not."

The two men clasped hands in the dim light, and were once more friends.

"The minds of many people in Pine Forks have been poisoned against me, Sharp," said the sheriff, slowly, as if weighing his words. "The escape of Grudge Grange and the burning of the jail seem to have aroused suspicion against me, and I am now a fugitive. Do you blame me, Sharp? Ought I to have stood my ground and died for a sentiment?"

"I think you did right in leaving town," returned the detective. "Miss Granger was quite right. She is a noble girl, and worthy of your love, Mr. Huntway."

"You cannot quarrel with me on that point, Sharp," returned the sheriff, laughing. "My flight, however, will convince many that I am guilty. It is that thought alone that troubles me."

"If you had remained, the mob, urged on by the Humbug Detective, would have lynched you. After that, even though proof of your innocence was forthcoming, it could do the dead sheriff no good. We will ferret out all this iniquity, Mr. Huntway, and in good time you can return to Pine Forks vindicated."

The earnest friendship of Steele Sharp touched Huntway deeply.

"I thank you, sir," he said, huskily. "It is indeed pleasant to have one friend among so many enemies. You scarcely know me, and yet you trust me against great odds."

"True. When you shot the panther and rescued me from the hands of outlaws, that act convinced me that you could not be a friend to the foes of law and order. I believe you true as steel, Sheriff Huntway, and my future acts shall be in conformity with this belief."

"Again I thank you."

"Please refrain."

"What would you advise now, Sharp?"

"If you will listen to my advice, you will go at once to Helena," returned the detective. "I did not go there as I intended, but have written a note that I should like to send. My duty lies in this neighborhood at present. Will you take the message I have to send?"

"I don't know. Aren't you in danger here, Sharp?" returned the sheriff, hesitatingly.

"Not in the least. I shall move about Pine Forks in disguise. I've an inkling of things that may yet rattle the dry bones of that town. If you will take my message to Helena, I will return to the cabin that I left but a short time since, where I have a friend and a horse, and where I left the letter."

"I will go," finally decided Huntway. And then he guided his horse after the swiftly-moving man-hunter, whose footsteps were as light as an Indian's.

At length the detective halted before a small cabin. Huntway dismounted and followed his friend inside.

A dim light burned within. The only occupant of the room was a negro as black as Erebus. He grinned at his visitors, and talked with Sharp in a low tone.

Presently the detective placed a sealed letter in the hand of the fugitive sheriff, and said:

"Deliver this to the one to whom it is addressed. It is sixty miles to Helena, but if you have a fleet horse, you can get there. Blink here is a true man, although his skin is black. You are armed?"

"Yes."

"Then go. Before many days the clouds will roll by, and you can return."

Clifford Huntway walked to the door and opened it. He recoiled with a great cry.

In front of him were human foes, and two revolvers were thrust into his face.

"Surrender!" cried a voice that was quite familiar to Steele Sharp.

The detective took in the situation at a glance. He bent to the ear of the black, and uttered a whispered word, then seized the shoulder of the sheriff and drew him backward, stepping to the front himself, with a six-shooter in his own good right hand.

"Impostor, you here again!" exclaimed Steele Sharp, as he confronted the foremost man—Steele Sharp No. 2.

The intruder recoiled.

And then the detective covered him with his weapon.

"Call off your hounds if you don't care to die!" hissed Sharp, fiercely.

"We are after Huntway," stammered Sharp No. 2. "If you attempt to shield him, on your head be the consequences."

The detective cast a side glance over his shoulder, and saw that the negro had slipped out the back way with the hunted sheriff. All Sharp cared to do now was to detain the pursuing men till Huntway could make good his escape.

"Huntway is our sheriff," answered the detective. "If you seek to harm him, you, and not I, are law-breakers, and I warn you to beware."

At this moment a man came limping from the rear of the house, and with a groan staggered against the Humbug Detective.

"No use, boss, he's gone," declared the man.

"Gone! Do you mean that Huntway has escaped? Why didn't you and Bill shoot him down sooner! That was the order!" cried the leader of the pursuing party, angrily.

"Blast ye!" growled the man, "I wasn't lookin' for a black thunderbolt 'at took me amidst ships an' doubled me up like a jack-knife. Bill fell over me, and the sheriff followed ther thunderbolt and escaped."

A smile touched the face of Steele Sharp. He understood how black Blink had sent the tough to grass with his head.

"You may come in if you like," said Sharp, good-humoredly. "I don't think you'll find the man you're after to-night."

The big-bearded man pushed his way into the cabin, followed by those men who had kept him company in the pursuit of the fugitive sheriff.

It did not take the men long to ascertain that Huntway had made good his escape. Had the negro presented himself at that moment, he might have been roughly handled. He was wise enough to keep out of the way for the time.

Detective No. 2 turned fiercely upon Steele Sharp, an angry light in his eyes.

"You have connived at the escape of Huntway, sir," grated the fellow. "Do you know what you have done? You have aided a criminal to escape, yes, you have, and you pretend to be a detective. Pah!"

"Don't let your disgust make a fool of you, Whiskerando," sneered Steele Sharp. "Bah! If you attempt to touch me, I'll drop you!"

The Humbug Detective recoiled at the muzzle of the detective's pistol.

He made no further advance upon the detective, but left the house, muttering threats under his breath.

In the mean time, having escaped to the thickets near, Sheriff Huntway halted and consulted with Blink.

"Dar's hosses down yender," declared the negro, pointing toward the trail. "Dem fellers what come arter you, boss, left dem dar."

The negro's remarks suggested an idea to the sheriff. He resolved to appropriate one of the animals, and accordingly crept forward in the gloom, and reached the side of a fine animal without being discovered.

Untying the strap from a sapling, Huntway vaulted to the saddle, and gave the animal rein.

It was not a satisfactory proceeding, this capturing an enemy's horse, yet, under existing circumstances, the fugitive believed himself justified.

Blink uttered a grunt of delight as he saw Huntway ride away into the gloom.

After going a short distance, believing himself beyond earshot, the fleeing sheriff gave the animal rein, and galloped rapidly from the vicinity.

He followed a trail that he knew well. It led him somewhat away from the proper course toward Helena, into an unsafe region, but he thought by this means to throw off pursuit.

For once, at least, Huntway had made a mistake, as the sequel proved.

Mile after mile he passed.

The moon rose, shedding a mellow glow over the hills.

Presently the fleeing sheriff galloped into the mouth of a narrow canyon, and entered the shadows. He had gone but a short distance when a dark object fell as from the clouds, circling about the waist of the sheriff.

The next instant he was jerked violently from the saddle.

CHAPTER XV.

FOILED BY HIS ENEMY.

A SINGLE horseman drew rein not far out of Pine Forks, and paused to read a notice posted against the trunk of a tree.

"2000.00 REWARD!"

"The above reward will be paid to any person giving information that will lead to the arrest of Clifford Huntway, once sheriff of this county, but now a fugitive from justice."

"STEELE SHARP, Sheriff."

"So that scoundrel has become sheriff in place of Huntway," uttered the reader. "Could infamy go further? There has been no election, and this scoundrel calling himself sheriff must have been appointed to fill a vacancy. And he signs himself a person whom he is not. The people of Upland county must be warned against the man they are trusting. Heavens! what a travesty on justice!"

The man rode on, shaping his course toward Pine Forks, which lay but a few miles in the distance. As he rode, he soliloquized again:

"Huntway did not reach Helena, that is evident. What befell him then on the road? Perhaps he deemed it safer to secrete himself in the hills for the present. It may be as well so. I'll put this new sheriff to his taps before many days. I have made discoveries that will bring two men very low. Ah! revenge is sweet, and I am soon to revel in it to repletion."

The rider, who was really Steele Sharp, the detective, rode on his way, and was scarcely lost to view when a second horseman halted before the placard on the tree.

He was not a pleasant-looking man, and his mouth opened in a grin as he studied the "reward."

"As I told Zerk, 'twasn't best ter put the feller under. He'd be wuth somethin' to us, and now here 'tis. Hol! Mr. Sheriff, you'll bring money to our locker arter all. I must communicate ter ther new sheriff somehow. I allow 't wouldn't be safe fer me ter ride inter the Forks jest yet. 'Twill be, though, when Huntway swings fur murder."

A satisfied chuckle fell from the man's lips.

Two thousand dollars were small stakes compared to those Grudge Grave had lost, but even that amount "wasn't to be sneezed at," as he expressed it.

Wheeling his horse, the mountain tough galloped back on the trail he had been following.

It was late in the afternoon of the same day that Steele Sharp No. 2, the new sheriff of Upland county, sat smoking and meditating on the situation.

He occupied a room in the tavern—not the one from which he had been frightened by Detective Sharp on the night the jail burnt—but a larger room, more befitting his new responsibilities.

A tap on the door caused the sheriff to remove his cigar. He merely said, "Come in!" and resumed his weed.

A boy in the employ of the hotel entered and placed a sealed letter on the great man's knee.

"'Twas left by a man from the hills."

Then the lad departed, closing the door behind him.

The name of "Steele Sharp, Sheriff," was illy scrawled on the envelope.

Quickly the mighty man tore off the covering and had the letter under his eye. It was short and to the point.

"MISTER SHERIFF—

"We've got ther man you want. Send a person with ther money ter Silent Canyon and we'll turn him over." "NUFF SED."

Steele Sharp No. 2 examined the letter critically. He was not fully persuaded that it was a genuine offer.

"It may be a trap," muttered he, as he puffed spasmodically at his cigar. "That detective who is running amuck against me on his own hook, for I know Granger and the rest repudiate him, is just keen enough to get up something of this kind. I've no doubt he wouldn't hesitate to put a bullet through my heart for a song. There's something about the fellow that seemed familiar the first time I met him. I don't know. I don't feel easy, and won't till that man and Huntway bite the dust."

For a long time the new sheriff communed with himself, the result being that he resolved to visit Silent Canyon with force enough to make it utterly safe.

Space will not permit our going into details here.

With a dozen men at his back the sheriff visited the spot in question, and after a little parley Huntway, with his hands bound securely, was turned over to the officers by Grudge Grave and Tub Zerk, who had captured him as he was riding through Silent Canyon on his way to Helena two nights before.

No harm came to the prisoner for whom the reward was duly paid, although dark looks were cast upon him by Sheriff Sharp and his companions.

Since the burning of the jail another building had been dedicated to that use, one of the most substantial structures in Pine Forks. Into this building the prisoner was hurried and a strong guard placed about the place.

"He must never be permitted to come to trial," declared Sheriff Sharp to himself, after he had returned to the hotel. "Of course it would be easy enough to convict him—the ring and knife would do that, but something might turn up, with such a man as the sneaking detective nosing around. He is as keen a fellow as the Steele Sharp he personates. I am well assured that he is not that detective, however."

The plotting villain who had so snugly ensconced himself in Huntway's shoes spared no pains to work up a feeling against the prisoner, that had died down somewhat since the day the young sheriff fled so precipitately from Pine Forks.

On the morning after his confinement in jail Clifford Huntway had a visitor in the person of Erastus Granger, who, in spite of rheumatic twinges, had forced himself to visit the deposed sheriff.

"I am truly shocked," declared the old cattle-king, as he confronted Huntway, "to see you here, Clifford. If I had not been your friend, I should not visit you this morning."

"I seem to be the victim of untoward circumstances," returned Huntway, whose pale face showed the mental suffering he was enduring. "I am guilty of no crime, yet here I am imprisoned like a common felon; it is infamous!"

"Ah! but you have brought it on yourself, Clifford. I am astonished at your perfidy. I would not have thought it possible until confronted with the proof. What have you done with the money?"

"What money?"

"The forty thousand dollars that you murdered poor Jasper Flake to obtain."

White and stern was the face of the old cattle-king when he put this question.

"For heaven's sake! Mr. Granger, do you believe I did that deed of villainy?"

Huntway seemed agast.

"False agony won't help your case in the least," declared the old man grimly. "I am convinced that this is your first offense, my boy, and to show you that I am still your friend I will agree to set you free and give you a chance to wipe out this stain in a new land, on one condition."

"Name it."

"That you return me the money you took from Flake."

"But you say Flake is dead?"
 "No. I did not say that. He still lives, but may die at any moment. You heard my offer. What have you to say to it?"
 "I cannot comply."
 "Why not?"
 "I haven't the money."
 "Ah! you have spent it?"
 "No. In heaven's name, can you not understand? I am innocent—"
 "Fool!" interrupted the old cattle-king, angrily. "You invite your own doom. Judge Lynch will settle your case! I will not lift a finger to prevent."
 With these ominous words, Granger stamped from the jail in a towering passion.

CHAPTER XVI.

A NOBLE GIRL'S SACRIFICE.

It was night.
 Clouds hung blackly athwart the heavens, and an occasional flash of lightning darted across the sky.

A dim light burned in a cabin on the hillside, perhaps half a mile from the outskirts of Pine Forks.

A man on his knees was at work trying to open a tin box that rested on the floor before him. He soon had it open, revealing bank-notes neatly packed in the box.

He took out a package and counted the notes one by one.

A domino hid the upper portion of the man's face, thus concealing his identity.

"All here," he finally muttered with a sigh of satisfaction. "I've not rested easy of late, fearing this money might be found, and I robbed a second time. I've had enough trouble over this and mean to make a bold stroke soon. When once Huntway goes under I shall turn my face from Montana forever."

Returning the money to the box, the man in mask locked it and proceeded to secrete the box in a nook under the floor.

This done, he rose to his feet.

He gazed keenly about him, then, hearing the boom of distant thunder, he smiled and said:

"A storm is coming. To-night would be a good time to put all doubts at rest. I believe it would be a good stroke to have Huntway suicide in his cell. Ha! ha! I had not thought of that."

Turning to a tallow dip that burned near, the man carried it to his lips. With one hand he lifted the mask from his face, just at the moment the light was extinguished.

"Ah! my man, your race is about run," muttered the shadow without. "Before you make your bold stroke I will bring you to the halter you have noosed for Clifford Huntway."

Out into the gloom passed he of the mask.

His swift moving steps sent back a ringing sound as he hurried down the hillside, and when the sound died out in the dim distance, the watcher outside the lone cabin moved to the door and tried it sharply.

It refused to yield.

"I'll not let so flimsy a barrier thwart me," muttered the man, as he threw his whole weight against the door.

It still refused to yield.

Suppose the masked man should return? This thought assured the prowler that he had no time to lose. Turning from the door he went to a narrow window.

He managed to break through this barrier, and quickly leaped into the small apartment.

Striking a match, the man soon found the loose plank, and from beneath it he drew the tin box, and with it under his arm he crept through the window and once more stood outside.

"I have the money at last, thank Heaven!" breathed the "shadow" fervently. "I'll now put on the screws and fix the crime of the Flake robbery on the right person."

Steele Sharp, for he it was, hurried away in the direction of Pine Forks with his prize under his arm.

The pot set boiling by the Humbug Detective was soon to foam over.

On the very night that the detective made a wonderful discovery at the lone cabin on the hillside, the bogus sheriff found himself at a late hour at the Open Hand Saloon, where a spirit invoked by whisky and bad men ran rampant for blood.

"Quietly, gentlemen, quietly!" uttered the warning voice of the new sheriff, as he pushed his way into the room. "No mob law will be permitted in Pine Forks while I am sheriff, remember that."

"Who's a-talkin' mob law?" growled a red-eyed tough, as he turned out a glass of whisky

and faced about to glare at the sheriff. "What we wants is jestic, and, by ther mountains, we'll hev it! Eh, pard?"

"You bet, Jack. That's ther talk."

Mr. Sharp No. 2 did not remain long at the Open Hand. The leaven was working, and he believed that an assault would be made on the jail before morning.

Of course the news of Huntway's capture reached Valeria, and she was deeply moved thereat.

She had hoped that he had made good his escape, since three days had passed with no word from him.

She hurried to the jail to see her lover, but was strictly forbidden entrance by the guards. In vain she pleaded.

"We obeys orders, miss," said one of the men.

"Orders!" she cried hotly. "Who dared order you to forbid my entrance here?"

"The sheriff, mum," meekly replied the man.

"The sheriff! You have him locked up here. He never gave such an order."

"It's the new sheriff, mum," explained the guard, respectfully, for he knew that Valeria was the niece of the most prominent man in the county, and it would never do to offer her insult.

"The new sheriff is a scoundrel!" declared Valeria, beside herself with indignation.

Hurrying homeward, the girl passed groups of men discussing the capture of Huntway, and more than one ominous threat fell on her ear.

When she reached home she heard a murmur of voices in the room occupied by her uncle. He had a visitor surely. Deeply anxious to consult with her uncle, the girl rapped on the door.

It was opened by Mr. Granger's partner in business.

"Ah, you have been absent. I came over for a talk with you, Val," said Rollin Longwood, with a smile. "I have just learned from your uncle of the capture of Clifford Huntway."

The hour at which this conversation occurred was afternoon of the day Detective Sharp secured the stolen money from the mountain cabin, as already recorded.

Mr. Longwood took the hand of Valeria and led her to a seat in the front room.

"You look pale, Val, and your hand trembles. Tell me what has happened."

"I have been grossly insulted," she declared with emphasis.

"Insulted! Tell me who has dared do such a thing."

His cheeks flushed, and he clinched his hands in anger.

She explained by telling of her visit to the jail, and of the refusal of the guards to permit her to see the prisoner.

"So that is where you have been, my dear Val."

A sorrowful expression overspread his handsome face.

"Yes, I went there hoping to see the prisoner," she declared.

"Val, tell me truly, what is there between you and this man Huntway?" questioned Longwood, in a saddened voice. "I hope nothing serious, for, as true as the sun shines, the fellow is guilty. I have myself sifted the evidence, and am now convinced, much as I hate to think so, that Clifford Huntway robbed and attempted to murder Jasper Flake."

"And you get your evidence from this man calling himself Steele Sharp," cried Valeria. "That fellow is an impostor, and I cannot understand why you and my uncle have permitted him to blind your eyes. He has no right to the office of sheriff, and if Mr. Huntway perishes it will not be justice, but murder!"

"My dear Val—"

"Hear me through," she interrupted fiercely, with flowing eyes and heaving bosom. "I know the law-defiers are out to-day, and I believe Mr. Huntway will be lynched unless he is taken to a place of safety. He ought to be granted a fair trial at all events."

"I agree with you there, Val," said Longwood with a serious countenance. "I trusted Clifford fully in the past, and I should hate to see him fall into the hands of a mob."

"You know there is danger of that very thing happening."

"Yes, the rough element is filling with poor whisky, and there's no knowing what may happen," admitted he, still sadly solemn.

"Rollin, you can save the prisoner, save him for a fair trial."

"I save him?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"By sending him under guard to Helena."

"If I had the authority I might do that," he admitted.

"You would be listened to as a man of prominence. I believe if you urged it, Sheriff Sharp, impostor and villain though he is, would obey your request," declared Valeria promptly.

"Perhaps. I have thought of doing this very thing, for to tell the truth I overheard a plot to-day that startled me, a plot to take Huntway from jail, and hang him at midnight. Two-score toughs have sworn to do this, and only what you suggest can save the prisoner. He might be spirited away under cover of darkness, to Helena, where he would be safe till the trial is set."

This announcement startled Valeria. Her face paled, and she cried huskily:

"Oh! Rollin, tell me you will save the prisoner, tell me you will, and I will do anything you ask."

"Anything, Val?"

"Yes, anything that is in my power to grant!" she murmured faintly.

He drew closer and dropped his arm about her slender waist, while his eyes glowed with a wonderful passion.

"Will you be my wife, Val? Promise, and I'll save Huntway from the doom that threatens."

"Your wife," faintly.

"Yes—speak quickly, there's none too much time left in which to work!"

It was not the first time he had asked her to be his. He saw his opportunity now and improved it.

"Speak!" he cried hoarsely. "Huntway's fate hangs on your answer!"

"Yes, I will be your wife, Rollin."

Instantly he dropped his arm and rushed from the room.

"My God! what have I done!" wailed poor Valeria, sinking in a heap to the floor.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TOUGH'S CONFESSION.

THE thunder boomed loudly.

A severe storm was sweeping over the hills and canyons of western Montana.

Bending over a prostrate form was a man whose face, as revealed to us by the lightning's red glare, is a familiar one, that of Steele Sharp No. 1, he who secured the box of stolen money after the robber had departed from the little cabin on the hillside.

"Are you badly hurt, my man?"

A groan answered.

The detective lifted the man in his arms, and bore him to a sheltered nook beneath an overhanging rock.

Here he chafed the man's hands, and lashed his face with a bush that he had plucked from the soil.

Not a pleasant treatment, yet it was effectual, and on this night Steele Sharp was very anxious about certain things.

"Rouse up, Grudge Grave!" cried the detective hoarsely. "Assert yourself and you may be a man yet."

"Eh, do you think so? What's happened anyhow?" growled the man, in a semi-conscious tone.

"Don't you remember? You fell over the cliff, and I saved you just as you were slipping into eternity."

"Good thunder! yes, I 'member 'at I was losin' my grip on the bush, and thar was an awful roarin' in my ears—and you saved me, pard?"

"I did. An instant more and you would have gone to your death."

"Put 'er thar, pard."

The knotty hand of Grudge Grave was thrust out, and the detective found his palm almost crushed in the grasp of the mountain tough.

"I'm everlastingly obleeged to yer, mister," answered Grave. "Ef thar's anything on 'erth I kin do, tell me and I'm yer huckleberry."

"First let us seek shelter from the storm. We cannot be far from a cave. I remember, there's one in this vicinity."

"I reckon there be," returned the tough, struggling to his feet.

He shaded his eyes from the red glare of lightning, and seemed to take his bearings at a glance.

"Old Nick's cabin hain't forty rod from hyar. Come, pard, fur I hear ther rain roarin' up ther gulch."

Grudge Grave turned away, and the detective followed close at his heels. In the course of a few minutes the tough pushed open the door of

a cabin and entered. No one seemed to occupy the place, and Grave struck a match and lit a lamp that stood on the window ledge.

"Nick died two weeks ergo," explained Grudge. "Me 'n ther boy planted him up yender a ways, and ther cabin hain't been habited sence. Thar ain't the least danger you 'n me a-bein' disturbed here."

Then the tough turned and glanced keenly into the face of his rescuer. He gazed, winked rapidly, and seemed puzzled.

"By ther horns o' Mars, pardner, but this ain't Sharp, ther detective?"

"You have made no mistake," answered the detective. "You imagined the black panther finished me that night in the basin cave, but I escaped, and am still on the trail. I've spotted my man, and before to-morrow at this time the truth shall be known, and the stolen fortune returned to its rightful owner."

"I dunno," muttered the tough, ablinking away from the detective. "I ain't jest prepared ter mingle wi' such as you. Mebbe thar mou't be a misundersandin'."

The speaker's hand fell to his hip, then a low cry followed.

"Don't alarm yourself, Mr. Grave," said the detective, smiling. "I was mindful of the situation and took the precaution to disarm you. For your attempt on my life I saved yours. Even a man in your position ought to feel grateful. I want to ask you a few questions, and perhaps seek your aid. I believe a good heart still beats beneath your rough jacket."

The tone of Steele Sharp was reassuring.

Grudge Grave's countenance softened. He put out his hand, and said, as he grasped the finger of the detective once more:

"You're a brick, Sharp, a downright trump card. Perceed to elucidate."

Both men sat down, one on a box, the other on a stool.

"You will understand two things before I tell you what I expect of you, Grudge—you are in my power, and you owe your life to me."

The tough nodded without reply.

"You are not a rich man by any means, yet you have many friends among the mountains of Montana."

"You bet yer life!"

"I am convinced that you know something about the robbery and attempted murder of Jasper Flake a fortnight since."

"I didn't do it, pard, I'll sw'ar to that," grunted Grave.

"I believe you utter the truth now," returned the detective, quickly.

"Put 'er thar, mister."

A pleased light dawned in the eyes of the mountain tough as he once more grasped the hand of Sharp.

"However," proceeded the detective, "you know something of that night's work. I am aware that you failed to get the money, and now the man who employed you has spoken disrespectfully of you. Make a clean breast of that night's work, Grudge, and you shall not suffer for it. I know where to put my hand on the money, and I have spotted the fellow who secured it, but I would like to know all about that day's transaction. You can tell me if you will, Grudge Grave."

"Mebbe."

"And you will do it?"

Eagerly Steele Sharp bent toward the rough man before him. A sullen flame leaped from the eyes of the tough.

"A neat trap you've set for me, mister, but I don't fall into it, not much. Ha! ha!" and Grudge Grave drew back.

"There's no trap but reward for you, if you will but open your lips in the interest of justice, Mr. Grave."

Something in the voice of the detective seemed to reassure the man, and putting out his hand he said:

"As Heaven hears ye, you'll be true to me—yer won't trap me, Sharp?"

"As Heaven hears me, no."

"I'm hard up, and tired o' this life. I reckon I've a boy in 'Frisco waitin' for his dad ter come, and that boy had a mother onc't, but she's 'long o' ther angels now. I want money, and I'm willin' ter confess 'at I got a thousan' fur turnin' ther sheriff over, but that ain't a primin' to my needs. How much of the reward do I git for speakin', boss?"

An avaricious gleam filled the eyes of the tough now.

"You shall have at least two thousand," assured the detective.

"What is it ye want ter know?"

"All that you do about the events of that night when Flake was robbed."

For a moment Grudge Grave hesitated. At length he said:

"The game's up, anyhow, and I'm goin' ter leave. I can't git nothin' from the man 'at hired me to rob Flake. I'll speak and tell the hull thing."

"That is right, my man."

"I was to have five thousan' for the job, boss, and not ter harm the messenger; that was the bargain."

"Who made this bargain with you, Grudge?" questioned Sharp, suddenly.

"I won't tell that," returned the tough. "Rough as I am, I never yet went back on a friend. I'll jest say 'at I was hired to git that forty thousand."

"And you got it?"

"Don't be too fast, pard," snapped Grave. "Ef you know so much erbout this affair tell it yerself."

"I beg pardon. I'm mum from this time on, Mr. Grave," cried the detective apologetically.

"I laid in wait fur ther messenger, and had er pard with me. Jest afore Flake, who was ridin' a boss, got to us, we heerd a pistol-shot and the next minute a boss, without a rider, came tearin' down ther trail like mad."

"We know'd somethin' hed happened then, bet yer life. Me'n my pard pushed right forward and found poor Flake lyin' beside ther trail a-bleedin' like er stuck pig. 'We've lost our prize,' ses I to my pard. He didn't say nothin', but jist swore. We lifted the messenger and left him on a mossy hillock, where he was jest a-gaspin', and I allowed he wouldn't live long."

"I was powerful disappointed, and suggested that we hunt down the robbers. Wal, we did hunt, but didn't find 'em fur a spell. It was almost night when, in sneakin' through the woods, I ran upon a man countin' a pack o' money."

"What sort of a man was he?" questioned the detective, unable to keep silent longer.

"Rather a stout chap, with an immense beard. He's ther present sheriff o' Pine Forks!"

"Ha! I thought so!" ejaculated the detective.

"Thar hain't much more to tell," proceeded Grudge Grave. "Thar was the money I wanted, so I crep' up and planted a right-hander under ther robber's ear, and laid him out. I didn't wait ter examine ther cuss, but snatched ther money and lit out. 'Twas almost night then, and I did a foolish thing, as I'm now willin' ter acknowledge."

"Instead o' goin' and hidin' the money, I went direct to my own shanty, and thar sat a-countin' it, when I was laid out by er stun, and ther money was stolen from me."

"I hadn't mor'n got ter my feet ag'in afore ther sheruff and a dozen men come onter me, and I was took off ter jail."

"Exactly," remarked the detective. "Was it the night after the robbery that you sat counting the money at your own table?"

"The second night after. You see, I jest laid low fur one day and night. I thought as I didn't git ther rhino of Flake, as was to be ther case, I wasn't holden to ther man 'at hired me, and so I concluded to keep the hull forty thousand, and by makin' er fool o' myself I lost the hull on't."

"You haven't the least idea who got the money from you?"

"Oh, yes, I hev."

"Who?"

"Ther chap 'at shot poor Flake, the same as is now in Huntway's shoes, and pretends to be er detective. He calls hisself Steele Sharpe!"

"I thought so. That man is at the end of his tether. The mystery of the great robbery is soon to be cleared up. The only danger now is to Huntway. We must save him, somehow."

Sharp rose to his feet.

He placed a hand on the shoulder of Grudge Grave and said:

"Tell me who hired you to rob Granger and Longwood's messenger, Grudge?"

"I won't do that. My honor's at stake."

Sharp smiled as he thought on this man's honor! Then he said:

"I'll tell you who hired you to commit this crime."

Bending low, he whispered a name in the ear of the tough.

"Holy smoke! you've hit it, boss!" exclaimed Grudge, bounding to his feet.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DENOUEMENT.

A NIGHT of fearful storm had passed. Rain fell in torrents during that night, and it was

this alone that prevented a determined assault on the improvised jail at Pine Forks.

The sun rose in an unclouded sky. Great puddles of water were revealed in the streets of the Montana town. Some of the saloons had remained open all night, and blear-eyed men lingered about these dens of iniquity in the morning.

The storm had prevented Longwood from ordering the removal of the prisoner to Helena.

Early this morning, however, a light wagon halted in front of the log building in which Clifford Huntway was confined. Two persons occupied the seat—one of them was Steele Sharp No. 2, the Humbug Detective, at present acting sheriff of Upland county.

"I've been instructed to remove the prisoner to Helena for safe-keeping," said the new sheriff, as he approached one of the guards.

No objection was offered, since the present sheriff had placed the guards here, and a little later Huntway was led into the open air, looking pale and unrested.

"I prefer to remain here," said the prisoner, when told of the decision of his successor.

"I am afraid you will not be safe here, Mr. Huntway. Granger & Longwood have both signified their wish that I convey you to Helena till the court convenes."

Huntway bowed his head and remained silent. His thoughts were bitter enough, and he distrusted the man who had usurped his place, but he deemed it best not to complain.

The buggy drove off with a man on either side of the prisoner.

"Make all haste," commanded the Humbug Detective. "I fear trouble is brewing, and we have no time to lose. There's bad blood around in Pine Forks, where it seems you have many enemies, Mr. Huntway."

"If I have enemies, it is because of you, sir," retorted the prisoner.

"Of me! Goodness! I have but done my duty," declared the officer.

"I know what you have been up to. I know, moreover, that you are an impostor, and that it would give you pleasure to turn me over to the mob."

Huntway spoke with no little bitterness. The sheriff did not trust himself to reply.

The vehicle rattled on, passing out of Pine Forks without molestation. Half a mile beyond the limits of the town the horses came to a sudden halt.

A man had sprung from the bushes that lined the wagon-trail and grasped the reins, throwing the animals back upon their haunches.

Sheriff Sharp stood up with a drawn revolver, while the driver seemed paralyzed.

"Quietly!" uttered the man at the reins. "A bullet from you will seal your doom. We want your prisoner! You can't cheat the gallows, as you thought to do, Mr. Sharp."

Gazing around him, the sheriff suddenly discovered that the road was lined on either side with armed men, a score of them at least.

A gleam of satisfaction crossed the face of Steele Sharp No. 2.

"You outnumber us ten to one," cried the officer, in a loud voice. "The odds are too great; you may have the prisoner," and he stepped back of the seat and pointed at Huntway, who sat pale as death, realizing that his last hour had come.

One of the party displayed a rope, which was significant.

"Back!" commanded Huntway, as eager hands were outstretched to seize him. "Sheriff, if you are not a coward, you will prevent this murder!"

His appeal was in vain.

Huntway was pulled from the buggy, and, as his wrists were manacled, he was quite at the mercy of the lynchers. The noosed rope was dropped over his head, and the prisoner was led under the branches of a tree.

Quite as eager as the lynchers, Sharp No. 2 leaped from the buggy, and pressed forward to witness the murder, without as much as a protest.

"Up with him!" screamed the sheriff, forgetting in his excitement the position he occupied.

"Hold, men of Pine Forks!"

A clarion voice rung through the crowd, and a man pressed his way to the front. The acting sheriff recoiled as he met the glow of a pair of keen eyes.

"The impostor again!" muttered Detective No. 2.

"Ha! it are Steele Sharp, the detective!"

exclaimed Grudge Grave, who seemed to be the leader of the mob.

The new-comer and Grudge exchanged glances. Evidently they understood each other.

"I am Steele Sharp, and yonder stands the impostor!" thundered the last-comer, pointing at the acting sheriff. "He has planned to murder Clifford Huntway, but he has failed. Men of Pine Forks, behold the robber and assassin of Jasper Flake!"

The bearded sheriff trembled, and shrunk before the words and pointing finger of the Helena detective.

At this moment the sharp hoof-beats of a galloping steed rung out on the clear morning air. All looked in the direction of the sound, to see a female riding like mad down the wagon-trail. She drew rein in the midst of the lynchers, her face blanching when she saw the situation of affairs.

"Stop this murder!" she cried, at the top of her voice. "Clifford Huntway is innocent! The messenger, Flake, has spoken!"

"What! Jasper Flake spoken?" cried eager voices, gathering around Valeria.

"Whom did he name as the robber and would-be assassin?" eagerly asked Sharp.

"The man of all others you would least suspect—Rollin Longwood!" returned the girl.

"Rollin Longwood!"

"It's a lie!" hissed the bearded acting sheriff, now trembling with intense excitement.

Steele Sharp turned upon the speaker and cried sharply:

"It is true, impostor! Behold the robber and assassin!"

Out went the hand of the speaker, and the next instant the sheriff was relieved of his huge beard, revealing the face of Rollin Longwood!

"You're at the end of your tether, my man. The money has been found, and you cannot escape justice!" hissed the detective, as he suddenly snapped handcuffs over the wrists of the Humbug Detective.

At this a wild shout went up.

The noose was removed from the neck of Clifford Huntway, and Valeria slipped from the saddle to fall sobbing on the breast of her lover.

A few days later.

While Sheriff Huntway sat in the front room at Granger's, talking with Valeria, a visitor entered the room occupied by the old cattle-king.

It was Steele Sharp.

"You are surprised to see me, Mr. Granger, I suppose."

"Not as surprised as I was to learn who it was that captured the treasure and nearly killed Flake. I'd never thought Rollin such a villain," declared the old man.

"Perhaps not, and yet are you much better?"

"Sir!" exclaimed the cattle-king, half starting to his feet.

"Quietly, old man! Don't become too indignant, for I know you better than you think. I know your past history to a T. I know how you came into your first fortune. Don't interrupt me, and I'll get through the sooner. Your brother died, leaving two children, a boy and girl, and to those children he left ten thousand dollars to be cared for by you as their guardian. How did you keep the sacred trust? You shipped the boy to a foreign country, and managed to get the money into your own hands—"

"Stop! This is false!" protested the cattle-king, angrily.

"No indeed," declared the detective, at the same time removing his mustache and a wig, revealing a smooth, boyish face.

"Barton Granger!" exclaimed the old man.

"I see you recognize me after the lapse of six years," proceeded the youth, whom we first met as Barton Bartlee, on the night Grudge Grave was arrested in his cabin.

"I came to Pine Forks seeking my sister, Valeria, who did not know that she was heiress to a fortune. Before I made myself known to her, I found myself the center of a most exciting drama, and I resolved to ferret out the robbery of your messenger.

"I saw the money in the hands of a masked man, who had taken it from Grudge Grave, your tool. I recognized the robber as your partner, and he left me insensible, to perish in a burning house.

"I revived in time to escape, and become the detective who finally was permitted to find the stolen fortune. I have had the permission of Steele Sharp to assume his name for the time

being, since he lies ill at Helena, and was unable to undertake the case.

"I have succeeded beyond my most ardent expectations. The villain who tried to win a fortune by murder and robbery is in prison."

"And I'm thankful for it. Longwood was only a drag to my business, Barton. I'll take you into partnership with me now," declared Granger.

"Not so fast, sir," rejoined Barton. "It was you who planned to get possession of that money belonging to the firm, and turn it to your own private use. Your tool has confessed. The only thing that can save you from prison is to give Valeria ten thousand dollars on her wedding-day, with accrued interest."

"Good heavens! you're a detective, sure enough! I'll do anything to get out of this scrape," pleaded the cattle-king, abjectly.

"Very well, we will see."

Soon after, the young detective left his uncle and consulted with Valeria and Huntway, who had ere this been let into the secrets of the past.

We need not linger over the denouement. Rollin Longwood died in the Helena prison before being brought to trial. His business was found to be insolvent.

Grudge Grave left the country for good, he having atoned in part for his evil life by aiding the cause of justice at the last.

Jasper Flake eventually recovered.

Clifford Huntway lost his ring as stated, it having been taken from his room by the principal villain in the drama.

Granger, the unscrupulous uncle, was glad enough to make restitution, and Valeria's brother, known as Steele Sharp, entered the cattle trade with Clifford Huntway, soon after the latter and Miss Granger were married.

THE END.

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